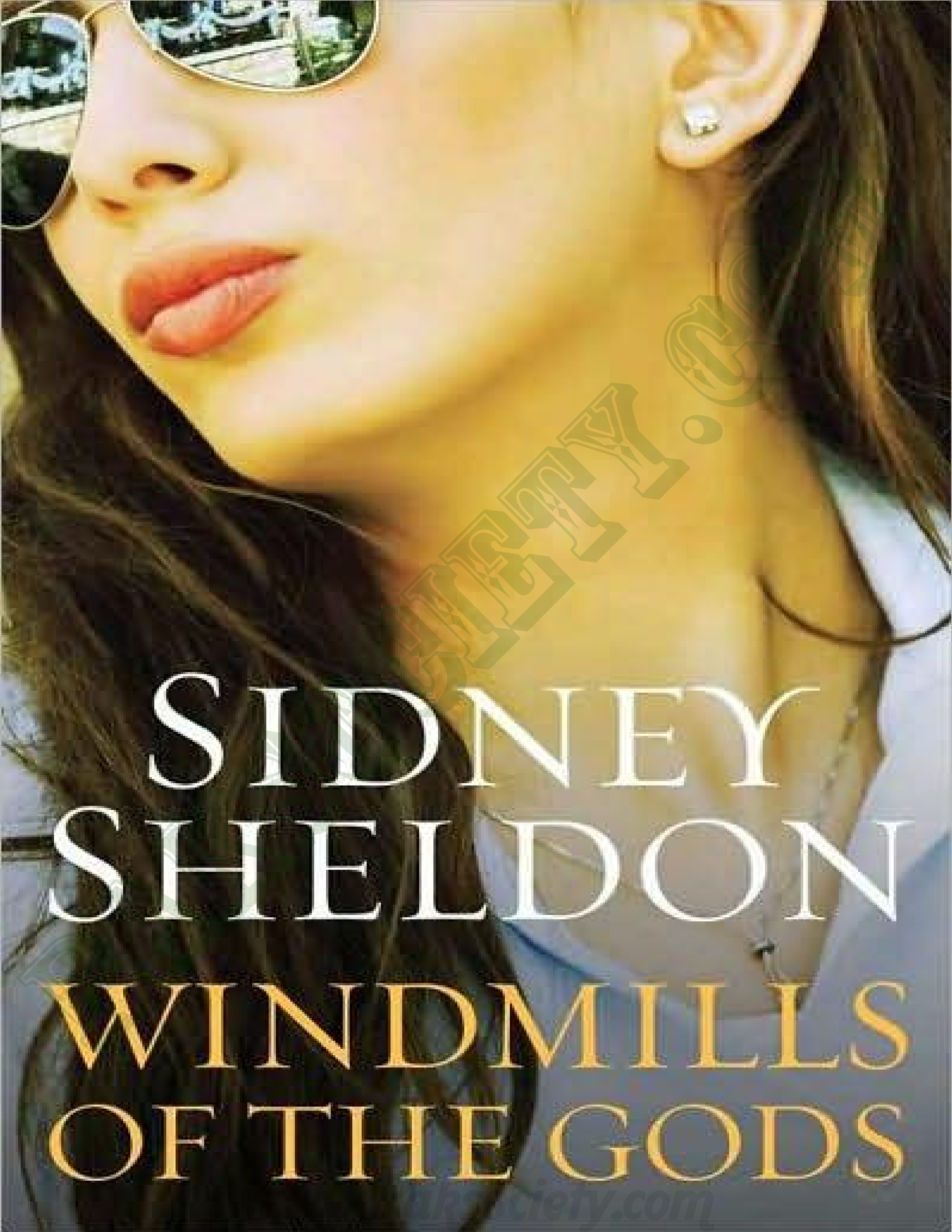

SIDNEY
SHELDON
WINDMILLS
OF THE GODS

WINDMILLS OF THE GODS

BY SIDNEY SHELDON

Condensed version

Synopsis:

It all began with an astounding call from the White House. One minute Mary Ashley, Kansas housewife and political science teacher, was chatting over dinner with her family; the next minute the President of the United States was asking her to become the new ambassador to Romania! That call changes everything for Mary Ashley. She becomes an instant celebrity, hounded 'by the press, courted by politicians.

Finally Mary arrives in exotic Bucharest to take up her duties, confident, refreshingly candid-and dangerously innocent. For watching her closely is an in- visible network 'of powerful men whose aim is to sabotage the President's bold new peace plan. They are about to set a diabolical trap. And the inexperienced young diplomat is the perfect bait.

"We are all victims, Anselmo.

Our destinies are decided

by a cosmic roll of the dice,

the winds of the stars,"

the vagrant breezes

of fortune that blow from

the windmills of the gods."

-H. L. Dietrich

A Final Destiny

Prologue

Perho, Finland. The meeting took place in a comfortable weatherproofed cabin in a remote wooded area two hundred miles from Helsinki. The members of the Western branch of the Committee had arrived discreetly at irregular intervals. They came from eight different countries, but their visit had been quietly arranged by a senior minister in the Valtioneuvosto, the Finnish Council of State, and there was no record of entry in their passports. Upon their arrival, armed guards escorted them into the cabin, and'when the last visitor appeared, the cabin door was locked and the guards took up positions in the full-throated January winds, alert for any sign of intruders.

The members, seated around the large rectangular table, were men in powerful positions, high in the councils of their respective governments. They had all met before in their official capacities, and they trusted one another because they had no choice. For added security, each had been assigned a code name.

The meeting lasted almost five hours, and the discussion was heated. Finally the chairman decided the time had come to call for a vote. He

rose, standing tall, and turned to the man seated at his right.
"Sigurd?"

"Yes."

"Odin?"

"Yes."

"Balder?"

"We're moving too hastily. The danger-"

"Yes or no, please."

"No."

" Freyr?"

"Yes."

"Sigmund?"

"Nein. If this should be exposed, our lives would be-"

"Thor?"

"Yes."

"Tyr?"

"Yes."

"I vote yes. The resolution is passed. I will so inform the Controller. We will observe the usual precautions and leave at twenty-minute intervals. Thank you, gentlemen."

Two hours and forty-five minutes later the cabin was deserted. A crew of experts carrying kerosene moved in and set the cabin on fire, the red

flames licked by the hungry winds.

When the fire brigade from Perho finally reached the scene, there was nothing left to see but the smoldering embers that outlined the cabin against the hissing snow.

The assistant to the fire chief approached the ashes, bent down, and sniffed. "Kerosene," he said. "Arson."

The fire chief was staring at the ruins, a puzzled expression on his face. "That's strange," he muttered.

"What?"

"I was hunting in these woods last week. There was no cabin."

Chapter One

Stanton Rogers was destined to be President of the United States. He was a charismatic politician, highly visible to an approving public, and backed by powerful friends. Unfortunately for Rogers, his libido got in the way of his career.

It was not that Stanton Rogers fancied himself a Casanova. On the contrary, until that one fateful bedroom escapade he had been a model husband. He was handsome, wealthy, and although he had had ample opportunity to cheat on his wife, he had never given another woman a thought.

There was a second, perhaps greater irony: Stanton Rogers' wife, Elizabeth, was social, beautiful, and intelligent, arld

the two of them
shared a common interest in almost everything, whereas Barbara, the
woman Rogers fell in love with, and eventually married after a much
headlined divorce, was five years older than Stanton, pleasant-faced
rather than pretty, and seemed to have nothing in common with him.
Stanton was athletic; Barbara hated all forms of exercise. Stanton was
gregarious; Barbara preferred to be alone with her husband, or to
entertain small groups. The biggest surprise was the political
differences. Stanton was a liberal, while Barbara was an archconservative.

Paul Ellison, Stanton's closest friend, had said, "You must be out of
your mind, chum! You and Liz are the perfect married couple. Do you
have any idea what a divorce is going to do to your career?"

Stanton Rogers had replied tightly, "Back off, Paul. I'm in love with
Barbara. Besides, half the marriages in this country end in divorce. It
won't do anything."

Rogers had proved to be a poor prophet. The press kept the story of the
bitterly fought divorce alive as long as they could, and the gossip
papers played it up as luridly as possible, with pictures of Stanton
Rogers' love nest and stories of secret midnight trusts. When the furor
died dovlrn, Stanton Rogers' powerful political friends found a new
white knight to champion: Paul Ellison.

Ellison was a sound choice. While he had neither Stanton

]Rogers' good
looks nor his charisma, he was intelligent, likable, and had the right
background. He was short in stature, with regular, even features and
candid blue eyes. He had been happily married for ten, years to the
daughter of a steel magnate.

Stanton Rogers and Paul Ellison had grown up together in New York. Their
families had had adjoining summer homes in Southampton. They were, in
the same class, first at Yale and later at Harvard Law School. Paul
Ellison did well, but it was Stanton Rogers who was the star pupil. Once
he was out of law school, Stanton Rogers' political star began rising
meteorically, and if he was the comet, Paul Ellison was the tail.

The divorce changed everything. It was now Stanton Rogers who became
the appendage to Paul Ellison. The trail leading to the presidency took
almost fifteen years. First Ellison became a highly popular, articulate
Senator. He fought against waste in government and Washington
bureaucracy. He was a populist, and believed in international detente.
When he was finally elected President of the United States, his first
appointment was Stanton Rogers, as presidential foreign affairs adviser.

MAMEWL McLuhan's theory that television would turn the world into a
global village had become a reality. The inauguration of the
forty-second President of the United States was carried by satellite to
more than one hundred and ninety countries.

In the Black Rooster, a Washington, D.C., hangout for newsmen, Ben Cohn, a veteran political reporter for the Washington Post, was seated at a table with four colleagues, watching the inauguration on the television set over the bar.

The camera panned to show the massive crowds gathered on Pennsylvania Avenue, huddled inside their overcoats against the bitter January wind.
Jason Merlin, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, finished the swearing-in oath, and the-new President shook his hand and stepped up to the microphone.

"Look at those idiots standing out there freezing their tails off"' Ben Cohn commenteel "Do you know why they aren't home like normal human beings, watching it on television?"

"Why?" asked one of the other reporters.

"Because a man is making history, my friends. One day all those people are going to tell their grandchildren that they were there the day Paul Ellison was sworn in. And they're all going to brag. "I was so close I could have touched him."' "You're a cynic, Cohn."

"And proud of it. Every politician in the world comes out of the same cookie cutter. They're all in it for what they can get out of it."

The truth was that Ben Cohn was not as cynical as he sounded. He had covered Paul Ellison's career from the beginning, and while it was true

that he had not been impressed at first, as Ellison moved up the political ladder Ben Cohn began to change his opinion. This politician was nobody's yes-man. He was an oak in a forest of willows.

Outside, the sky exploded into icy sheets of rain, Ben Cohn hoped the weather was not an omen of the four years that lay ahead. He turned his attention back to the television set and President E.Ilison's speech.

"I speak today not only to our allies but to those countries in the Soviet cainp. I say to them now, as we prepare to move into the twenty-first century, that there is no longer any room for confrontation and that we must learn to make the phrase 'one world' become a reality.
Vast chasms lie between us, but the first priority of this administration will be to build unshakable bridges across those chasms."

His words rang out with a deep, heartfelt sincerity. He, means it, Ben Cohn thought. I hope no one assassinates the guy.

IN JUNeTiON City, Kansas, it was a potbellied stove kind of day, bleak and raw, and snowing hard. Mary Ashley cautiously steered her old station wagon toward the center of the highway, where the snowplows had been at work. The storm was going to make her late for the class she was teaching.

From the car radio came the Presiden's voice: "Because I believe that there is no problem that cannot be solved by genuine goodwill on both

sides, the concrete wall around East Berlin and the iron curtain that
surrounds the Soviet satellite countries must come down."

Mary Ashley thought, I'm glad I voted for him. Paul Ellison is going to
make a great President.

IN BucH=ST, the capital of Remania, it was evening. President
Alexandres lonescu sat in his office surrounded by half a dozen aides,
listening to the broadcast on a shortwave radio.

"As you are aware," the American President was saying, "three years ago,
upon the death of Remania's President, Nicolae CeauSSescu,]Remania
broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. I want to inform
you now that we have approached the government of Remania and its
President, Alexandres Ionescu, and he has agreed to reestablish
diplomatic relations with our country.

"One of our first official acts will be to send an ambassador to
Remania. And that is merely the beginning. I have no intention of
stopping there. Albania broke off all diplomatic relations with the
United States in 1946. I intend to reestablish those ties. In
addition, I intend to strengthen our diplomatic relations with Bulgaria,
with iczechoslovakia, and with East Germany.

"Sending our ambassador to Remania is the beginning of a worldwide
people-to-people movement. Let us never forget that all mankind shares
a common origin, common problems, and a common ultimate fate. Let us

remember that the problems we share are greater than the problems that
divide us, and that what divides us is of our own making."

Over the shortwave radio came the sounds of cheers and applause.

IN A heavily guarded villa in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris, the Remanian
revolutionary leader, Marin Groza, was watching President Ellison on
channel 2 television.

"I think our time has come, Ley. He really means it," said Marin Groza
thoughtfully.

Ley Pastemak, his security chief, replied, "Won't this help Ionescu?"

Marin Groza shook his head. "lonescu is a tyrant, so in the end nothing
will help him. But I must be careful with my timing. I failed when I
tried to overthrow him before. I must not fail again."

PETE Connors had downed almost a fifth of Scotch while watching the
inaugural speech. He poured himself another glassful and turned back to
the image on the television set. "You filthy Communist!" he yelled at
the screen. "This is my country, and the CIAs not gonna let you give it
away. We're gonna stop you, Ellison. You can bet your bottom dollar on
it"

Chapter Two

PAUL Ellison said, "I'm going to need your help, old friend."

"You'll get it," Stanton Rogers replied quietly.

It was their first meeting together in the Oval Office, and President Ellison was uncomfortable. If Stanton hadn't made that one mistake, he thought, he would be sitting at this desk instead of me.

As though reading his mind, Stanton Rogers said, "I have a confession to make. The day you were nominated for the presidency, I was bitterly jealous. It was my dream, and you were living it. But I came to realize that if I couldn't sit in that chair, there was no one else I would want there but you."

Paul Ellison smiled at his friend and pressed the button on his desk. Seconds later a white-jacketed steward came into the room.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

Paul Ellison turned to Rogers. "Coffee?"

"Sounds good."

"Want anything with it?"

"No, thanks. Barbara wants me to watch my waistline."

The President nodded to Henry, the steward, and he quietly left the room.

Barbara. She had surprised everyone. The gossip around Washington was that the marriage would not last out the first year. But it had been almost fifteen years now, and it was a success. Stanton Rogers had built up a prestigious law practice in-Washington, and Barbam had earned the reputation of being a gracious hostess.

Paul Ellison rose and began to pace. "My people-to-people speech seems
to have caused quite an uproar. I suppose you've seen all the
newspapers."

"Yes," said Stanton Rogers. "And quite candidly, Mr. President, you're
scaring the pants off a lot of people. The armed forces are against
your plan, and some powerful movers and shakers would like to see it
fail."

Ellison sat down and faced his friend. "It's not going to fail."

The steward appeared with the coffee. "Can I get you something else,
Mr. President?"

"No. That's it, Henry. Thank you."

The President waited until the steward had gone. "I want to talk to you
about finding the right ambassador to send to Remania."

"Right."

"I don't have to tell you how important this 'is for us, Stan. I want
you to get moving on it as quickly as you possibly can."

Stanton Rogers took a sip of his coffee and rose to his feet. "I'll get
State on it right away."

IN a little suburb of Neuilly it was two a.m. Marin Groza's villa lay
in ebon darkness, the moon nestled in a thick layer of -storm clouds.
The streets were hushed at this hour, as a blackclad figure moved

noiselessly through the trees toward the brick wall that surrounded the
villa. Over one shoulder he carried a rope and a blanket, and in his
arms he cradled a dart gun and an Uzi submachine gun with a silencer.
When he reached the wall, he stopped and listened. He waited,
motionless, for five minutes. Finally, satisfied, he uncoiled the nylon
rope and tossed the scaling hook attached to the end of it upward. It
caught on the far edge of the wall, and swiffly the man began to climb.
When he reached the top of the wall, he flung the blanket across it to
protect himself against the poison-tipped metal spikes embedded on top.
He stopped again to listen. He reversed the hook, shifhng the rope to
the inside of the wall, and slid down onto the ground. He checked the
balisong at his waist, the deadly Filipino folding knife that could be
flicked open or closed with one hand.

The attack dogs would be next. The intruder crouched there, waiting for
them to pick up his scent. There were two Dobermans, trained to kill.
But they were only the first obstacle. The grounds and the villa were
filled with electronic devices and continuously monitored by television
cameras. All mail and packages were received at the gatehouse and
opened there by the guards. The doors of the villa were bombproof. The
villa had its own water supply, and Marin Groza had a food taster. The
villa was impregnable. Supposedly. The figure in black was here this
night to prove that it was not.

He heard the sounds of the dogs rushing at him before he saw them. They came flying out of the darkness, charging at his throat. He aimed the dart gun and shot the one on his left first, then the one on his right, dodging out of the way of their hurtling bodies. And then there was only stillness.

The intruder knew where the sonic traps were buried in the ground, and he skirted them. He silently glided through the areas of the grounds that the television cameras did not cover, and in less than two minutes after he had gone over the wall" he was at the back door of the villa.

As he reached for the handle of the door he was caught in the sudden glare of floodlights. A voice called out, "Freeze! Drop your gun and raise your hands."

The figure in black carefully dropped his gun and looked up. There were half a dozen men spread out on the roof, with a variety of weapons pointed at him.

The man in black growled, "What the devil took you so long? I never should have gotten this far."

"You didn't," the head guard informed him. "We started tracking you before you got over the wall."

Ley Pastemak was not mollified. "Then you should have stopped me sooner. I could have been on a suicide mission with a load of grenades. I want a meeting of the entire staff in the morning, eight

o'clock
sharp. The dogs have been stunned. Have someone keep an eye on them
until they wake up."

Ley Pastemak prided himself on being the best security chief in the
world. He had been a pilot in the Israeli Six-Day War and after the war
had become a top agent in Mossad, one of Israel's secret services.

He would never forget the morning, two years earlier, when his colonel
had called him into his office and said, "Ley, Marin Groza wants to
borrow you for a few weeks."

Mossad had a complete file on the Remanian dissident. Groza had been
the leader of a popular Remanian movement to depose Alexandres Ionescu
and was about to stage a coup when he was betrayed by one of his men.
More than two dozen underground fighters had been executed, and Groza
had barely escaped with his life. France had given him sanctuary. Then
lonescu had put a price on his head. So far, half a dozen attempts to
assassinate Groza had failed, but he had been wounded in the most recent
attack.

"What does he want with me?" Pastemak had asked. "He has French
government protection."

"Not good enough. He needs someone to set up a foolproof security
system. He came to us. I recommended you."

"I'd have to go to Francer'

"'Only for a few weeks. Ley, we're talking about a mensch. He's the man in the white hat. Our information is that he'll soon have enough popular support in Remania to knock over Ionescu. When the timing is right, he'll make his move. Meanwhile, we have to keep the man alive."

Ley Pastemak had thought about it "A few weeks, you said?"

"That's all."

The colonel had been wrong about the time, but he had been right about Marin Groza. He was a white-haired, fragile-looking man whose face was etched with sorrow. He had deep black eyes, and when he spoke, they blazed with passion.

"I don't give a damn whether I live or die," he told Ley at their first meeting. "We're all going to die. It's the when that I'm concerned about. I have to stay alive for another year or two. That's all the time I need to drive the tyrant Ionescu out of my country."

Ley Pastemak went to work on the security system at the villa in Neuilly. He used some of his own men, and the outsiders he hired were checked out thoroughly. Every single piece of equipment was state-of-the-art.

Pastemak saw the Remanian rebel leader every day, and the more time he spent with him, the more he came to admire him. When Marin Groza asked Pastemak to stay on, Pastemak agreed, saying, "Until you're ready to

make your move."

At irregular intervals Pastemak staged surprise attacks on the villa,
testing its security. Now he thought, Some of the guards are getting
careless. I'll have to replace them.

He walked through the hallways checking the heat sensors, the electronic
warning systems, and the infrared beams at-the sill of each door. As he
reached Groza's bedroom he heard a loud crack, and a moment later Groza
began screaming out in agony.

Ley Pastemak passed Marin Groza's room and kept walking.

THE Monday-morning executive staff meeting was under way in the
seventh-floor conference room at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.
Seated around the large oak table were Ned Tillingest, director of the
CIA; General Oliver Brooks, Army Chief of Staff; Secretary of State
Floyd Baker; Pete Connors, chief of counterintelligence; and Stanton
Rogers.

Ned Tillingest, the CIA director, was in his sixties, a cold, taciturn
man burdened with maleficent secrets. There is a light branch and a
dark branch of the CIA. The dark branch handles clandestine operations,
and for the past seven years Tillingest had been in charge of both
sections.

General Oliver Brooks was a West Point soldier who conducted his
personal and professional life by the book. He was a'company man, and

the company he worked for was the United States Army.

Floyd Baker, the Secretary of State, was of southern vintage,
silver-haired, distinguished-looking, with an olo-fashioned gallantry.
He owned a chain of influential newspapers around the country and was
reputed to be enormously wealthy.

Pete Connors was black Irish, a stubborn bulldog of a man, hard-drinking
and fearless. He faced compulsory retirement in August. As chief of
counterintelligence, Connors held sway over the most secret, highly
compartmentalized branch of the CIA. He had worked his way up through
the various intelligence divisions, and had been around in the good old
days when CIA agents were the golden boys. In fact, Pete Connors had
been a golden boy himself. As far as he was concerned, no sacrifice was
too great to make for his country.

Now, in the middle of the meeting, his face was red with anger. "This
idiotic people-to-people program has to be stopped. We can't allow the
President to give the country away. We-"

Floyd Baker interrupted. "The President has been in office less than a
week. We're all here to carry out his policies and-"

"He sprang his plan on us. We didn't have a chance to get together a
rebuttal."

Ned Tillingest turned to Stanton Rogers. "Connors has a point. The
President is actually planning to invite the communist countries to send

their spies here posing as attaches, chauffeurs, secretaries, maids.
We're spending billions to guard the back door, and the President wants
to throw open the front door."

General Brooks nodded agreement. "I wasn't consulted, either.

In my opinion, the Presiden's plan could destroy this country."

Stanton Rogers said, "Gentlemen, some of us may disagree with the
President, but Let's not forget that the people voted for Paul Elhson.
We have to support him in every way we can." His words were followed by
a reluctant silence. "All right, then. The President wants an update
on Remania. What's the situation with President Ionescu?"

"lonescu's riding high in the saddle," Ned Tillingest replied. "Once he
got rid of the CeauSSescu family, all of CeauSSescu's allies were either
assassinated, jailed, or exiled. Since he seized power Ionescu's been
bleeding the country dry. The people hate his guts."

"What about the prospects for a revolution?"

Tillingast said, "Ah, That's rather interesting. Remember a couple of
years back when Marin Groza almost toppled the lonescu government?"$

"Yes. Groza got out of the country by the skin of his teeth."

"With our help. Our information is that there's a popular ground swell
to bring him back. Groza would be good for Romania, and good for us.

We're watching the situation."

Stanton Rogers turned to the Secretary of State. "Do you have that list
of candidates for the Remanian post?"

Floyd Baker took an envelope from a leather attaches case and handed it
to Rogers. "These are our top prospects. They're all career diplomats.
Naturally," he added, "the State Department favors a career diplomat
rather than a political appointee. Someone who's been trained for this
kind of job. Remania is an extremely sensitive post."

"I agree." Stanton Rogers rose to his feet. "i'll discuss these names
with the President and get back to you."

As the others got up to leaveNed Tillingast said, "Stay here, Pete. I
want to talk to you." When they were alone, Tillingast said, "You came
on pretty strong, Pete."

"But I'm right," Pete Connors said stubbornly. "The President is trying
to sell out the country. What are we supposed to do?"

"Keep your mouth shut, Pete. And be careful. Very careful."

Ned Tillingast had been around longer than Pete Connors. He had been a
member of Wild Bill Donovan's OSS before it became the CIA. He too
hated what the bleeding hearts in Congress were doing to the
organization he loved. It had been Tillingast who had recruited Pete
Connors out of college, and Connors had turned out to be one of the
best. But in the last few years Connors had become a

cowboy-a little
too independent, a little too quick on the trigger.
Dangerous.

"Pete, have you heard anything,about an underground organization calling
itself Patriots for Freedom?" Tillingast asked.

Connors frowned. "No. Can't say that I have. Who are they?"

"All I have is smoke. See if you can get a lead on them."

"Will do."

An hour later Pete Connors was making a phone call from a public booth.
"I have a message for Odin," he said.

"This is Odin," General Oliver Brooks replied.

PAUL Ellison threw the list of candidates down on his desk. "They're
dinosaurs," he snapped. "Every one of them."

"Mr. President," Rogers protested, "these people are all experienced
career diplomats."

"And hidebound by State Department tradition. You remember how we lost
Remania three years ago? Our experienced career diplomat in Bucharest
screwed up, and we were out in the cold. The pin-striped boys worry me."

"But if you put an amateur in there, someone with no experience, you're
taking a big risk."

"Maybe we need someone with a different kind of experience. Remania is
going to be a test case, Stan." He hesitated. "I'm not kidding myself.

I know that there are a lot of powerful people who don't want to see this work. If it fails, I'm going to get cut off at the knees. I don't intend for that to happen."

"I can check out some of our political appointees who-"

President Ellison shook his head. "Same problem. I want someone with a completely fresh point of view. Someone who can thaw the ice. The opposite of the ugly American."

Stanton Rogers was studying the President, puzzled. "Mr. President, I get the impression that you already have someone in mind."

"As a matter of fact," Paul Ellison said slowly, "I think I have."

"Who is he?"

"She. Did you happen to see Ide article in Foreign Affairs magazine called'Ddtente Now'?"

"Yes."

"She wrote it. What did you think of it?"

"thought it was interesting. The author believes that we're in a position to try to seduce the communist countries into coming into our camp by offering them economic and-" He broke off "It was a lot like your inaugural speech."

"Only it was written six months earlier. She's published brilliant articles in Commentary and Public Affairs. Last year I read a book of hers on Eastern European politics, and I must admit it

helped clarify
some of my ideas."

"Okay. So she agrees with your theories. That's no reason-"

"Stan, she went further than my theory. She outlined a detailed plan
That's brilliant. She wants to take the four major world economic pacts
and combine them."

"How can we-"

"It would take time, but it could be done. Look. You know that in 1949
the Eastern-bloc countries formed a pact for mutual economic assistance,
called COMECON, and in 1958 the other European countries formed the
EEC-the Common Market."

"Right."

"We have the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development,
which includes the United States, some Western-bloc countries, and
Yugoslavia. And don't forget that the Third World countries have formed
a nonaligned movement of their own."

The Presiden's voice was charged with excitement. "Think of the
possibilities. If we could combine these plans and form one big
marketplace, it could be awesome! It would mean real world trade. And
it could bring peace."

Stanton Rogers said cautiously, "It's an interesting idea, but It's a
long way off. Do you know anything about this woman?"

"No. Except that she's extremely bright and that we're on the same
wavelength. Her name is Mary Ashley. I want you to find out everything
you can about her."

Two days later President Ellison and Stanton Rogers breakfasted
together.

"I got the information you asked for."]Rogers pulled a paper from his
pocket. "Mary Elizabeth Ashley. Milford Road, junction City, Kansas.
Age, almost thirty-five. Married to Dr. Edward Ashley. Two children:
Beth, twelve, and Tim, ten. Assistant professor, Eastern European
political science, Kansas State University. Grandfather born in
Remania." He looked up thoughtfully. "I must admit she sounds
interesting."

"I think so too. I'd like to have a full security check run on her."

"I'll see that It's done."

"I DISAGREE, Professor Ashley," said Barry Dylan, one of the twelve
graduate students in Mary Ashley's political science seminar.
"Alexandros lonescu is worse than CeauSSescu ever was."

"Can you back up that statement?" Mary asked.

The waiting lists to get into Mary Ashley's classes were longer than any
other professor's at Kansas State University. She was a superb teacher,
with an easy sense of humor and a warmth that made being around her a
pleasure. She had an oval face that changed from

interesting to
beautiful, depending on her mood. She had the high cheekbones of a
model, and almond-shaped, hazel eyes. Her hair was dark and thick. She
had a figure that made her female students envious and the males
fantasize, yet she was unaware of how beautiful she was.

"Well," said Barry, "Ionescu has cracked down hard on all the pro-Groza
elements and reestablished a hard-line, pro-Soviet position. Even
CeauSSescu wasn't that bad."

Another student spoke up. "Then why is President Ellison so anxious to
establish diplomatic relations with him?"

"Because we want to woo him into the Western orbit. Also-" The bell
sounded. The time was up.

Mary said, "Monday we'll discuss the possible consequences of President
Ellison's plan to penetrate the Eastern bloc. Have a good weekend."

Mary Ashley loved the give-and-take of her graduate seminar. Foreign
names and places became real, and historical events took on flesh and
blood. This was her fill year on the faculty at Kansas State, and
teaching still excited her.

She especially enjoyed teaching about Remania. It had been her
grandfather who had instilled in her a deep curiosity about his native
land. He had told her romantic stories of Queen Marie

and baronesses and princesses; tales of Albert, the prince consort of

England, and of Alexander II, Czar of Russia.

Somewhere in our background there is royal blood. If the revolution had not come, you would have been a princess.

She used to have dreams about it.

She taught five political science classes in addition to the graduate seminar, and each of them dealt with the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. At times she felt like a fraud. I've never been to any of the countries I teach about, she thought. I've never even been outside the United States.

Mary had planned a trip abroad when she received her master's degree, but that summer she met Edward Ashley, and the European trip turned into a three-day honeymoon at Waterville, fifty-five miles from junction City, where Edward was taking care of a critical heart patient.

"We really must travel next year," Mary said to Edward shortly after they were married. "I'm dying to see Rome and Paris and Remania."

"So am I. It's a date. Next summer."

But that following summer Beth was born, and Edward was caught up in his work at the Geary Community Hospital. Two years later Tim was born. Mary had gotten her Ph.D. and gone back to teaching at Kansas State University, and somehow the years had melted away. Except for brief trips to Chicago, Atlanta, and Denver, Mary had never been out of the

state of Kansas.

One day, she promised herself. One day ...

Mary gathered her notes together, put on her coat and a scarf, and
headed out to her car. As she passed Denison Hall a stranger with a
Nikon camera aimed it at the building and pressed the shutter. Mary was
in the foreground of the picture. One hour later the photograph was on
its way to Washington, D.C.

EVERY town has its own distinctive rhythm, a life pulse that springs
from the people and the land. Junction City, in Geary County, is a farm
community one hundred and thirty miles west of Kansas City. It prides
itself on being the geographical center of the continental United
States. The downtown shopping area consists of scattered stores,
fast-food chains, and gas stations-the types of establishments that are
duplicated- n hundreds of small towns across America. But the residents
of junction City love it for its bucolic peace and tranquillity. On
weekdays, at least. Weekends, junction City becomes the
rest-and-recreation center for the soldiers at nearby Fort Riley.

MARY Ashley stopped to shop for dinner at Dillon's Market and then
headed home. The Ashleys lived in an eight-room,stone house set in the
middle of gently rolling hills. It had been bought by Dr. Edward
Ashley and his bride thirteen years earlier.

"It's awfully large for just two people," Mary Ashley had protested when

they'd first taken a look at it.

And Edward had taken her into his arms and held her close. "Who said
It's going to be for only two people?"

When she walked in the door this evening, Tim and Beth ran to greet her.

"Guess what?" Tim said. "We're going to have our pictures in the
paper!"

"Help me put away the groceries," Mary said. "What paper?"

"The man didn't say, but he said we'd hear from him."

Mary stopped and turned to look at her son. "Did he say why?"

"No," Tim said. "But he sure had a nitty Nikon."

ON SUNDAY, Mary celebrated-although that was not the word that sprang to
her mind-her thirty-five birthday. Edward had' arranged a surprise
party for her at the country club. Their neighbors, Florence and
Douglas Schiller, and four other couples were waiting for her. Edward
was as delighted as a small child at the look of amazement on Mary's
face when she walked into the club and saw the festive table and the
happy birthday banner. After dinner, as Mary blew out the candles on
her cake, she looked across at Edward and thought, How lucky can a lady
be?

Monday morning she awoke with a headache. There had been a lot of
champagne toasts the night before. She eased her way out

of bed and
went down to the kitchen, where she set about preparing breakfast for
the children.

Beth, Mary's twelve-year-old daughter, walked into the room carrying an
armful of books.

Mary put a box of cereal on the table. "I bought a new cereal for you.
You're going to like it."

Beth sat dowti at the kitchen table and studied the label on the cereal
box. "I can't eat this. You're trying to kill me."

"Don't put any ideas in my head,". her mother cautioned.

Tim, Mary's ten-year-old, ran into the kitchen. He slid into a chair at
the table and said, "I'll have bacon and eggs."

"Whatever happened to good morning?" Mary asked. "Good morning. I'll
have bacon and eggs. Can I go to the skating rink after school, Mom?"

"You're to come right home and study. Mrs. Reynolds called me. You're
failing math. How do you think it looks for a college professor to have
a son who's failing math?"

"It looks okay. You don't teach math."

They talk about the terrible twos, Mary thought grimly. What about the
terrible nines, tens, elevens, and twelves?

She had packed a lunch for each of them, but she was concerned about
Beth, wtio was on some kind of crazy new diet. "Please, Beth, eat all of

your lunch today."

"If it has no artificial preservatives. I'm not going to let the greed
of the food industry ruin my health."

Whatever happened to the good old days of junk food? Mary wondered.

Tim plucked a loose paper from one of Beth's notebooks. "Look at this!"
he yelled. "'Dear Beth, Let's sit together during study period. I
thought of you all day yesterday and-"$

"Give that back to me!" Beth screamed. "Thaes mine!"

"Hey! It's signe. "Virgil." I thought you were in love with Arnold."

Beth snatched the note away from him. "What would you know about love?
You're a child."

At that moment they heard the horn of the school bus outside. Tim and
Beth started toward the door.

"Wait! You haven't eaten your breakfasts," Mary said. She followed them
out into the hallway.

"No time, Mother. Got to go."

"Bye, Mom."

And they were gone.

Mary, feeling drained, looked up as Edward came down the stairs.

"Morning, darling," he said.

"Sweetheart, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure, beautiful." He gave her a kiss. "Anything."

"want to sell the children."

"Who'd buy them?"

"Strangers. They've reached the age where I can't do anything right.
Beth has become a health-food freak, and your son is turning into a
world-class dunce."

Edward said thoughtfully, "Maybe they're not our kids."

"I hope not. I'm making oatmeal for you."

"Sorry, darling. No time. I'm due in surgery in half an hour."

Mary looked at Edwaid and felt a glow. Even after all these years, she
thought, he's still the most attractive man I've ever known.

"I may decide to keep the kids, after all," she said. "I like their
father a lot."

"To tell you the truth," said Edward, "I'm rather fond of their,
mother." He took her in his arms.

MARY and Edward left the house together, bowing their heads against the
relentless wind. Edward strapped himself into his Ford Granada and
watched Mary as she got behind the wheel of the station wagon.

"Drive carefully, sweetheart," Edward called.

"You too, darling." She blew him a kiss, and the two cars drove away

from the house, Edward heading toward the hospital and Mary toward the university.

Two men parked half a block from the Ashley house waited until the vehicles were out of sight. "Let's go."

They drove up to the house next door to the Ashleys'. The driver sat in the cilr while his companion walked up to the front door and rang -the bell. The door was opened by an attractive brunette in her middle thirties.

"Mrs. Douglas Schiller?"

"Yes?"

The man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an identification card. "My name is Donald Zamlock. I'm with the Security Agency of the State Department. I want to ask you a few questions about your neighbor, Mrs. Ashley."

She looked at him with concern. "Mary? Why would you be asking about her?"

"May I come in?"

"Yes." Florence Schiller led him into the living room. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I'll only take a few minutes." He smiled reassuringly. "This is just a routine check. She's not suspected of any wrongdoing."

"I should hope not," Florence Schiller said indignantly.

"Mary Ashley
is one of the nicest persons you'll ever meet." She added,
"Have you met
her?"

"No, ma'am. This visit is confidential, and I would
appreciate it if
you kept it that way. How long have you known Mrs.
Ashley?"

"About thirteen years. Since the day she moved in next
door."

"Would you say that you know Mrs. Ashley well?"

"Of course I would. Mary's my closest friend. What-"

"Mrs. Schiller, in your opinion is Mrs. Ashley an
emotionally stable
person?"

"Of course she is."

"Mrs. Ashley's grandfather was born in Remania. Have you
ever heard
her discuss Remania?"

"Oh, once in a while she'll tell stories her grandfather
told her about
the old country."

"One last question. Have you ever heard Mrs. Ashley or
Dr. Ashley say
anything against the United States government?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Then in your estimation they're both loyal Americans?"

"You bet they are. Would you mind telling me-"

The man rose. "I want to thank you for your time, Mrs.
Schiller. And
I'd like to impress upon you again that this matter is

highly
confidential. I would appreciate it if you didn't discuss it with
anyone-not even your husband."

A moment later he was out the door. Florence Schiller stood there
staring after him. "I don't believe this whole conversation took
place," she said aloud.

BRIDGE WITH THEIR NEIGHBOIRS the Schillers was a Mondaynight ritual for
Mary and Edward Ashley. The fact that Douglas Schiller was a doctor and
worked with Edward at the hospital made the two couples even closer.
Douglas Schiller was normally a pleasant, easygoing man, but at the
moment there was a grim expression on his face. They were in the middle
of the game, and the Schillers were ten thousand points behind. For the
fourth time that evening Florence Schiller had reneeed.

"Florence!" Douglas exploded. "Which side are you on?"

"I'm sorry," she said nervously.

"Is anything bothering you?" Edward Ashley asked Florence.

"I can't tell you."

They all looked at her in surprise: "What does that mean?" her husband
asked.

Florence Schiller took a deep breath. "Mary, It's about you."

"What about me?"

"I'm not supposed to tell. I promised."

"You promised who?" Edward asked.

"A federal agent from Washington. He was at the house this morning asking me all kinds of questions about Mary."

"What kind of questions?" Edward demanded.

"Oh, you know. was she a loyal American? was she stable?"

"Wait," Mary said excitedly. "I think I know. I'm up for tenure.

The university does some sensitive government research on campus, so I suppose they check everyone pretty thoroughly."

"Well, thank God That's all it is." Florence Schiller breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought they were going to lock you up."

"I hope they do." Mary smiled. "At Kansas State."

Abbeywood, England. "We are meeting under the usual rules, the chairman announced. "No records will be kept, this meeting will never be discussed, and we will refer to one another by the code names we have been assigned."

There were eight men inside the library of the fifteenth-century Claymore Castle. Two armed men kept vigil outside, while a third man guarded the door to the library.

.The chairman continued. "The Controller has received some disturbing information. Marin Groza is preparing a coup against Alexandros Ionescu. A group of senior army officers in Remania has decided to back

Groza. This time he could very well be successful."

Odin spoke up. "How would that affect our plan?"

"It could destroy it. It would open too many bridges to the West."

Freyr said, "Then we must prevent it from happening."

Balder asked, "How?"

"We assassinate Groza," the chairman replied.

"Impossible. His villa is impregnable. Anyway, no one in this room can
afford to be involved in an assassination attempt."

"We wouldn't be directly involved," the chairman said. "The Controller
has discovered a confidential dossier that concerns an international
terrorist who's for hire. He's called Angel."

"Never heard of him," Sigmund said.

"So much the better. His credentials are most impressive. According to
the Controller's file, Angel was involved in the Sikh Khalistan
assassination in India. He helped the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. He's
masterminded the assassinations of half a dozen army officers in Israel,
and the Israelis have offered a milliondollar reward for him, dead or
alive."

"He sounds promising," Thor said. "Can we get him?"

"He's expensive. If he agrees to take the contract, it will cost us two
million dollars."

"How do we get to this Angel person?" Sigmund asked.

"All his contacts are handled through his mistress, a woman named Neusa Mufiez. Angel has set her up in an apartment in Buenos Aires."

Thor said, "Who would get in touch with her for us?"

The chairman replied, "The Controller has suggested a man named Harry Lantz. He was thrown out of the CIA for setting up his own drug business in Vietnam. While he was with the CIA he did a tour in South America, so he knows the territory. He'd be a perfect go-between." He paused. "I suggest we take a vote. All those in favor of hiring Angel, please raise your hands."

Eight well-manicured hands went into the air.

"Then It's settled." The chairman rose. "The meeting is adjourned. Please observe the usual precautions as you leave."

Chapter Three

IN HIS hotel room in New York, Harry Lantz was awakened in the middle of the night by the ringing of the telephone.

Who the devil knows I'm here? he wondered. He looked blearily at the bedside clock, then snatched up the phone. "It's four o'clock in the morning! Who the-"

A soft voice at the other end of the line began speaking, and Lantz sat upright in bed, his heart beginning to pound. "Yes, sir."

He listened for a long time. Finally he said, "Yes,. sir. I

understand. I'll be on the first plane to Buenos Aires. Thank you, sir."

He replaced the receiver and lit a cigarette. His hands were trembling. The man he had just spoken to was one of the most powerful men in the world and was going to pay him fifty thousand dollars to deliver a message. It would be fun going back to Argentina. Harry Lantz loved South American women.

THE 747 arrived at Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires at five the following afternoon. Harry Lantz felt a surge of excitement as he stepped out of the plane, but the blast of hot air startled him for a moment. Of course, he realized. It's summer here.

Yes, it was good to be back. Siesta was over, and the streets were crowded with people. When the taxi arrived at the Hotel El Conquistador, in the heart of the fashionable Barrio Norte sector, Lantz paid the driver with a million-peso note.

"Keep the change," he said. Their money was a joke.

Harry looked up an old friend. No one had ever .heard of Neusa Mufiez. Harry Lantz began to feel he might be on a wild-goose chase.

It was at the Pilar, a small bar in the barrio of Floresta, that his luck suddenly changed. It was a Friday night, and the bar was filled with workingmen. It took Lantz ten minutes to get the bartender's attention. Before Lantz was halfway through his prepared

speech, the
bartender said, "Neusa Muez? S(. I know her. If she wishes to talk to
you, she will come here maana, about midnight."

The following evening Harry Lantz returned to the Pilar at eleven
o'clock and took a place at the bar, watching the room gradually fill
up. As midnight approached, he found himself getting more and more
nervous. If she doesn't show up, he thought, I can kiss the fifty grand
good-bye.

He wondered what she looked like. She had to be a stunner. He was
authorized to offer her boyfriend, Angel, a cool two million dollars to
assassinate someone, so Angel was probably up to his ears in millions.
He would be able to afford a beautiful young mistress.

The door opened, and Lantz looked up expectantly. A woman was walking
in alone. She was middle-aged and unattractive, with a fat, bloated
body and huge, pendulous breasts that swayed as she walked. Her face
was pockmarked, and she had dyed blond hair. A hooker down on her luck,
Lantz decided.

The woman looked around the bar with vacant, listless eyes, then pushed
her way over to Harry. "Wanna buy me a drink?"

She had a heavy Spanish accent.

She looks like a fat cow, Lantz thought..And she's drunk. "Get lost,
sister."

"Esteban, the bartender. He say you are lookin' for me,

no?"

"He must have made a mistake. I'm looking for Neusa Muez."

"Si. Yo soy Neusa Mudez."

But the wrong one, Harry thought. "Are you Angel's friend?"

She smiled drunkenly. "Si."

Harry Lantz recovered swiffly. "Well, well." He forced a smile. "Can we
go to a corner table and talk?"

They fought their way across the smoky bar, and when they were seated,
Harry Lantz said, "I'd like to talk about-"' "You buy me a rum, s(? A
double."

Lantz nodded. "Sure." When the waiter left, Lantz said, "I want to meet
with Angel. I have a little present for him."

She studied him. "St? What kin'a present?"

"Two million dollars."

Their drinks arrived. She downed hers in one gulp. "Wha' for you wanna
give Angel two million dollars?"

"That's something I'll have to discuss with him in person."

"Thais not possible. Angel, he don' talk to nobody."

"Lady, for two million dollars-"

Neusa Mufiez struggled to her feet. "I tol' you, he don' talk to
nobody. Ad16s."

"Hey! Wait a minute! Don't go."

She looked down at him with bleary eyes. "What you wan'?"

"sit down," Lantz said slowly, "and I'll tell you what I want."

She sat down heavily. "I need a rum, huh?"

Harry Lantz was baffled. What kind of man is this Angel? he wondered.
His mistress is not only the ugliest broad in all of South America, but
she's a lush.

Lantz did not like dealing with drunks. On the other hand, he hated the
thought of losing his fifty-thousand-dollar commission. He summoned the
waiter and ordered the drink, then smiled and said reasonably, e Neusa,
if I can't talk to Angel, how can I do business with him?"

"Ess simple. You tell me what you wan'. I tell Angel. If he say sf, I
tell you s(. If he say no, I tell you no."

Lantz distrusted using her as a go-between, but he had no choice.
"You've heard of Marin Groza?"

"No."

He patted her fat hand. "Angel will know who Groza is. You just say
Marin Groza. He'll know. The people who sent me want him blown away.
Killed."

"Oh. I'll ass' Angel. Wha' you say the man's name is?"

He wanted to shake her. "Groza. Marin Groza.

"Yeah. My baby's outa town. I'll call him tonight an' meet you here tomorrow. Kin I have 'nother rum?"

Neusa Muez was turning out to be a nightmare. How could a man who was supposed to be as smart as Angel get hooked up with such a rum dummy?

THE following night Harry Lantz was seated at the same table in the Pilar, intermittently chewing peanuts and his fingernails. At two a.m. he saw Neusa Muez stumble through the door and make her way over to him.

"Hi," she mumbled, and slumped into a chair.

"Neusa, did you remember to talk to Angel?"

She looked at him vacantly. "Angel? Si. Kin I have a drink, huh?"

He ordered a double rum for her and a double Scotch for himself. He needed it desperately. "What did Angel say, Neusa?"

,Angel? Oh, he say yeah. Ess okay."

Harry Lantz felt a surge of relief. "That's wonderful!" He no longer cared about his messenger-boy mission. He had thought of a better idea.

Lantz prided himself on being a pro. He was too smart to walk into a deal like this without first checking it ou.t. Before leaving the States, he had cautiously asked around about Angel, and what had impressed him most was that the Israelis had put a price of a million dollars on his head. This drunken floozy was going to lead him to

Angel. He was going to collect that one million dollars.

He watched her slop down her drink, spilling some of it on her already
soiled blouse. "What else did Angel say?"

"Angel say he wanna know' who your people are."

Lantz gave her a winning smile. "You tell him That's confidential,
Neusa. I can't give him that information."

She shrugged. "Then Angel say to tell you to get lost."

Harry Lantz's mind started working at top speed. "Neusa, I'll telephone
the people I'm working for, and if they give me permission, I'll give
you a name. Okay?"

She nodded, indifferent.

"You tell Angel I'll have an answer for him by tomorrow. Is there
someplace I can reach you?"

guess so."

He was making progress. "Where?"

"Here."

He made the call collect from a telephone booth so it could not be
traced. It had taken him one hour to get through.

"No," the Controller said. "I told you, no r -mmes.

"Yes, sir. But there's a problem. Neusa Mufiez, Angel's mistress, says
he's willing to make a deal, but he won't move without knowing who he's
dealing with."

"What is this woman like?"

"She's a fat, ugly moron, sir."

"It's much too dangerous for my name to be used."

Harry Lantz could feel the deal slipping away from him. "Yes, sir," he said earnestly. "The only thing is, sir, Angel's reputation is based on his being able to keep his mouth shut. If he ever started talking, he wouldn't last five minutes in his business."

There was a long silence. "Very well. You may give Angel my name. But he is never to divulge it and never to contact me directly. He'll work only through you."

Harry Lantz could have danced. "Yes, sir. I'll tell him. Thank you, sir." He hung up, a big grin on his face. He was going to collect the fifty thousand. And then the million-dollar reward.

WHEN Harry Lantz met Neusa Muez late that evening, he immediately ordered a double rum for her and said happily, "Everything's set. I got permission."

She looked at him indifferently. "Yeah?"

He told her the name of his employer. It was a household word.

She shrugged. "Never hearda him."

"Neusa, the people I work for want this done as quickly as possible. Marin Groza is hiding out in a villa in Neuilly, and-"

"Where?"

"It's a suburb of Paris," he said patiently. "Angel will know."

"I need 'nother drink."

An hour later Neusa was still drinking, and this time Harry Lantz was encouraging her. When she's drunk enough, he thought, she's going to lead me straight to her boyfriend. The rest will be easy. "When is Angel coming back to town?" he asked.

She focused her watery eyes on him. "Nex' week."

Harry Lantz took her hand and stroked it. "Why don't you and I go back to your place?" he asked softly.

"Okay."

He was in.

NEUSA MUez lived in a shabby two-room apartment that was as messy and unkempt as its tenant. When they walked through the door, Neusa made straight for the little bar in the corner.

Lantz watched as she poured a drink and downed it. She's the most ugly, repulsive pig I've ever met, he thought, but the million dollars is going to be beautiful.

Lantz walked over to her and put his arms around her huge, flabby waist.
"You're cute, do you know that?"

"Wha'?" Her eyes were glazed.

He was getting nowhere. He had to think of an approach that would get

this amazon into bed. But he knew he had to make his move carefully. If
he offended her, she might report him to Angel, and that would be the
end of the deal.

As Lantz was desperately trying to think of a clever gambit Neusa
mumbled, "Come on 'n the bedroom."

He grinned in relief. "That's a great idea, baby."

She stumbled as Lantz followed her into the small bedroom. In it was a
large unmade bed and a bureau with a cracked mirror above it. It was
the open closet that caught Harry Lantz's attention. He glimpsed a row
of men's suits hanging on a rack.

He went into the bathroom to undress, and when he returned, Neusa was
propped up in bed like a leviathan. He sat down beside her. She was
drunker than he had thought. Th:It's good, he said to himself. It will
make things easier. "You're a very pretty woman, honI like you a lot."
He began to caress her. "I'll bet you live an exciting life being
Angel's girlfriend. That must be really interesting. Tell me, baby,
What's Angel like?"

There was a silence, and he wondered if Neusa had fallen asleep. "Don't
go to sleep, sweetheart. Not yet." He felt her stir. "What kind of man
is Angel? Is he handsome?"

"Rich. Angel, he's rich."

Lantz continued to caress her. "Who are his friends?"

Her voice was drowsy. "Angel got no fren's. I'm his fren'."

Neusa closed her eyes. "Hey, I'm sleepy. Let's go to sleep."

Lantz stayed there quietly until he was certain Neusa was asleep. Then
he carefully arose from the bed, padded over to the closet, and switched
on the closet light.

There were a dozen suits hanging on the rack and six pairs of men's
shoes on the floor. Lantz opened the jackets and examined the labels.
The suits were all custom-made by Heffera, Avenida la Plata. I've hit
the jackpot! Lantz gloated. They'll have a record of Angel's address.
I'll go and ask a few questions. Then all I have to do is tip off my
friends in Mossad and collect the reward.

Lantz thought he heard a sound from across the room. He quickly turned
out the closet light and walked over to the bed. Neusa's eyes were
closed, 'and she was snoring lightly. He tiptoed to the bureau and
began looking through the drawers, hoping to find a photograph of Angel.
No luck. He crept back to bed.

WHEN Harry Lantz awoke in the morning, he heard Neusa singing off key in
the bathroom.

She was standing in front of the mirror. Her hair was done up in fat
curlers, and she looked, if possible, even more unattractive than
before. She pointed to the bathtub full of water. "I fix a bath for

you. When you're finish', I fix breakfast."

"Sounds great," he lied.

"You like omelets? I make good omelets. Angel teach me."

Neusa plugged in an electric hair dryer and began to dry her hair.

Lantz stepped into the bathtub and lay back in the warm water, thinking,
Maybe I should get a gun and take Angel myself. If I let the Israelis do it, there'll probably be an inquiry into who gets the reward. This way there won't be any question. I'll just tell them where to pick up his body.

Neusa said something, but Harry Lantz could barely hear her over the roar of the hair dryer.

"What did you say?" he called out.

"I got a presen' for you from Angel."

She dropped the electric hair dryer into the water and stood there watching as Lantz's body twitched in a dance of death.

PRESIDENT PAUL ELLISON looked down at the last security report on Mary Ashley and said, "Not a blemish, Stan."

"I know. I think she's the perfect candidate. Of course, State isn't going to be happy."

"We'll send them a crying towel. Now Let's hope the Senate will back us up. Would you like another drink, Stan?"

"No, thanks. Unless you need me tonight, I'm taking

Barbara to an
opening at the Kennedy Center."

"You go ahead," Paul Ellison said. "Alice and I are due to entertain
some relatives of hers."

"Please give my love to Alice," Stanton Rogers said. He rose.

"And you give mine to Barbara."

Chapter Four

MARY Ashley's nerves were on edge during dinner. The children were
being impossible again. Beth refused to touch her food.

"No one eats meat anymore," Beth insisted. "It's a barbaric custom
carriedover from the cavernan. Civilized people don't eat live
animals."

. "It's not alive," Tim argued. "It's dead, so you might as well eat
it."

"Children! Quiet. Beth, go make yourself a salad."

"She could go graze in the field," Tim offered.

"Tim! Finish your dinner." Mary's head was pounding.

The telephone rang.

"That's for me," Beth said. She leaped out of her chair and raced
toward the telephone. She picked it up and said flirtatiously,
"Virgil?" She listened a moment, and her expression changed. "Oh, sure,"
she said disgustedly. She slammed down the receiv&r and returned to the

table.

"What was that all about?" Edward asked.

"Some joker. said it was the White House calling Mom."

"The White House?"

The telephone rang again.

"I'll get it." Mary rose and walked over to the telephone. "Hello." As she listened, her face grew grim. "We're in the middle of dinner, and I don't think this is funny- What? Who?

The President?" There was a hush in the room. "Wait, I- Oh, good evening, Mr. President." There was a dazed expression on her face. Her family was watching her, wide-eyed. "Yes, sir. I do. I recognize your voice. H'm sorry about hanging up a moment ago. Beth thought it was Virgil, and- Yes, sir. Thank you." She stood there listening. "Would I be willing to serve as what?" Her face suddenly flushed.

Edward was on his feet, moving toward the phone, the children close behind him.

"There must be some mistake, Mr. President. My name is Mary Ashley. I'm a professor at Kansas State University, and- You read it? Thank you, sir." She listened for a long time. "Yes, sir. I agree. But that doesn't mean that I- Yes, sir. I'm sure It's a wonderful opportunity, but I- Of course. I will. I'll talk it over with my husband and get back to you." She picked up a pen and wrote down a number. "Yes, sir. I

have it. Thank you, Mr. President. Good-bye." She slowly replaced the
receiver and stood there in shock.

"What in heaven was that all about?" Edward demanded.

"was it really the President?" Tim asked.

Mary sank into a chair. "Yes. It really was."

Edward took Mary's hand in his. "Mary, what did he want?"

Mary sat there, numb, thinking, So That's why that man was questioning
Florence. She looked up at Edward and the children and said slowly,
"The President read my book and the article in Foreign Affairs, and he
thought they were brilliant. He said That's the kind of thinking he
Wants for his people-to-people program. He wants to nominate me as
ambassador to Remania."

There was a look of total disbelief on Edward's face. "You?

Why you?"

It was exactly'what Mary had asked herself, but she felt Edward could
have been more tactful. He could have said, How wonderfull You'd make a
great ambassador.

"You haven't had any political experience."

"I'm well aware of that," Mary responded tartly. "I agree that the
whole thing is ridiculous."

"Are you going to be the ambassador?" Tim asked.

Edward turned to the children. "You two finish your

dinner.

Your mother and I would like to have a little talk."
Edward took Mary's
arm and led her into the library. He turned to her and said, "I'm sorry
if I sounded like a pompous jerk in there. It was just such a-"

"No. You were perfectly right. Why on earth should they have chosen
me?"

"Honey, you'd probably make a great ambassador. But you must admit it
came as a bit of a shock."

"Try thunderbolt. I still can't believe it." Mary laughed. "Wait until
I tell Florence. She'll die."

"You're really excited about this, aren't you?" asked Edward.

She looked at him in surprise. "Of course. Wouldn't you be?"

Edward chose his words carefully. "It is a great honor, honey, and I'm
sure they must have had good reason for choosing you'."

He hesitated. "We have to think about this very carefully."

She knew what he was going to say, and she thought, Edward's right. Of
course he's right.

"I can't just leave my practice and walk out on my patients. I have to
stay here. I don't know how long you'd have to be away, but if it
really means a lot to you, well, maybe you could go over there with the

children and I could join you whenever-"

Mary said softly, "You crazy man. Nothing means as much to me as you
and the children. I could never live away from you."

He took her in his arms. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. It was exciting being asked. That's enough."

THE following morning Mary dialed the number that the President had
given her. "This is Mrs. Edward Ashley. The Presidents assistant, Mr.
Greene, is expecting my call."

"One moment, please."

A male voice on the other end said, "Hello. Mrs. Ashley?"

"Yes," Mary said. "Would yo. "Please give the President a message for
me? That I'm very, very flattered by his offer, but my husband's
profession ties him down here, so I'm afraid it would be impossible for
me to accept. I hope he understands."

"I'll pass on your message," the voice said noncommittally. "Thank you,
Mrs. Ashley." The line went dead.

Mary slowly replaced the receiver. It was done. For one brief

moment a tantalizing dream had been offered her. But that was all it
was. A dream. This isomy real world, she thought. I'd better get
ready for my first class.

Manama, Bahrein. The whitewashed stone house was

anonymous, hidden
among dozens of identical houses a short walk from the souks, the large,
colorful outdoor markets. It was owned by a merchant sympathetic to the
cause of Patriots for Freedom.

The chairman was speaking to the men gathered in the living room. "A
problem has arisen. The motion that was recently passed has run into
difficulty. The go-between we selected Harry Lantz-was murdered. His
body was found floating in the harbor in Buenos Aires."

"Do the police have any idea who did it?" Balder asked. "I mean, can
they connect this to us in any way?"

"No. We're perfectly safe."

Thor asked, "What about our plan? Can we go ahead with it?"

"Not at the moment. We have no idea how to reach Angel. However, the
Controller gave Harry Lantz permission to reveal his name to him. If
Angel is interested in our proposition, he will find a way to get in
touch with him. All we can do now is wait."

THE man directly responsible for Marin Groza's safety was Roland Passy,
the French minister of defense. Gendarmes were stationed in front of
the villa -in Neuilly twenty-four hours a day, but it was the knowledge
that Ley Pastemak was in charge of the villa's inner security that gave
Passy confidence. He had seen the security arrangements himself and was
firmly convinced that the house was impregnable.

In recent weeks rumors had been sweeping the diplomatic world that a
coup was imminent, that Marin Groza was planning to return to Remania,
and that Alexandres lonescu was going to be deposed by his senior
military officers.

Ley Pastemak knocked on the door and entered the bookcrammed library
that served as Mann Groza's office. Groza was seated behind his desk,
working.

"Everybody wants to know when the revolution is going to happen,"
Pastemak said. "It's the world's worst-kept secret."

Tell them to be patient. Will you come to Bucharest with me, Ley?"

More than anything Ley Pastemak yearned to return to Israel. "I'll only
take this job temporarily," he had told Marin Groza. "Until you're ready
to make your move." Temporarily had turned into weeks and months, and
finally into two years. And now it was time to make another decision.
In a world peopled with pygmies, Ley Pastemak thought, I have been given
the privilege of serving a giant. Marin Groza was the most selfless and
idealistic man Ley Pastemak had ever known.

When Pastemak had come to work for Groza, he had wondered about the
man's family. Groza would never speak of them, but the officer who had
arranged'for Pastemak to meet Groza told him the story.

"Groza was betrayed. The Securitate picked him up and tortured him for
five days. They promised to free him if he would give .

them the names
of his associates in the underground. He wouldn't talk. They arrested
his wife and his fourteen-year-old daughter and brought them to the
interrogation room. Groza was given a choice: talk or watch them die.
It was the hardest decision any man ever had to make. It was the lives
of his beloved wife and child against the lives of hundreds of people
who believed in him." The man paused, then went on more slowly. "I
think in the end what made Groza decide the way he did was that he was
convinced he and his family were going to be killed anyway. He refused
to give them the names. The guards strapped him in a chair and forced
him to watch his wife and daughter being tortured until they died."

"How he must hate them!"

The officer looked into Ley Pastemak's eyes and said, "The most
important thing for you to understand is that Marin Groza does not want
to return to Remania to seek vengeance. He wants to go'back to free his
people. He wants to make certain that such things can never again
happen."

Ley Pastemak had been with Groza from that day on, and the more time he
spent with the revolutionary, the more he came to love him. Now he
would have to decide whether to give up his return to Israel and go to
Remania with Groza.

PAsTERNAK was WALKING down the hallway that evening, and as he passed

Marin Groza's bedroom door he heard the familiar screams of pain ring
but. So It's Friday, Pastemak thought; Marin Groza's day of penance.

Every Friday night the halls of the villa resounded with Groza's
screams. That was the day of the week when Groza would shut himself in
his room and whip himself mercilessly, until his blood flowed, even
though no amount of self-inflicted pain would 'ever eradicate the
terrible guilt that consumed him. Each time he felt the lash of the
whip, he would see his wife and daughter screaming for help. And he
would cry out, "I'm sorry! I'll talk. Oh, God, please let me talk. .
.."

THE telephone call came ten days after Harry Lantz's body was found. The
Controller was in the middle of a staff meeting in the conference room
when the intercom buzzer sounded. "I know you asked not to be
disturbed, sir, but there's a Miss Neusa Mufiez calling from Buenos
Aires. It sounds urgent. I told her-"

"It's all right." He kept his emotions under tight control. "I'll take
the call in my private office." He went into his office and locked the
door. "Hello. Is this Miss Mufiez?"

"Yeah. I got a message for you from Angel. He din' like the nosy
messenger you sent."

The Controller chose his words carefully. "I'm sorry. But we would
still like Angel to go ahead. Would that be possible?"

"Yeah. He say he wanna do it."

"Excellent. How shall I arrange his advance?"

The woman laughed. "Angel, he don' need no advance.
Nobody cheats
Angel." Somehow the words were chilling. "When the job is
finished, he
say you put the money in- Wait a minute. I got it wrote
down. Here it
is-the State Bank in Zurich. I think That's someplace in
Switzerland."
She really did sound like a moron.

"I'll need the account number."

"Oh, yeah. Hol' on. I got it here somewhere." He heard
the rustle of
papers, and finally she was back on the telephone. "Here
it is. j
three four nine zero seven seven."

"How soon can he handle the matter?"

"When he's ready, sehor. Angel say you'll know when I ees
done. You'll
read 'bout it in the newspapers."

"Very well. I'm going to give you my private telephone
number in case
Angel needs to reach me."

He gave it to her slowly.

Thilisi, Russia. The meeting was being held in an
isolated dacha
bordering on the Kura River.

The chairman said, "Two urgent matters have arisen. The
first is good
news. The Controller has had word from Angel. The
contract is moving
forward."

"That's very good news indeed!" Freyr exclaimed. "What's the bad news?"

"I'm afraid it concerns the Presiden's candidate for the ambassadorship
to Remania, but the situation can be handled. . . ."

IT was difficult for Mary Ashley to keep her mind on her class. Too much
had changed. The Junction City newspaper had carried a feature story on
her rejection of the ambassadorship to Remania, and the fact that she
had declined the Presiden's offer had made the story even bigger than if
she had accepted it. In the eyes of the community and her students she
had become a celebrity. It was a heady feeling.

Remania, she mused. Welcome to Remania, Madam Ambassador. Your
limousine is here to drive you to your embassy. Her embassy. She had
been invited to live in Bucharest, one of the most exciting capitals of
the world, reporting to the President, being in the center of his
people-to-people concept. I could have been a part of history.

Mary was roused from her reverie by the sound of the bell. Class was
over. Time to go home and,change. Edward was taking her out to the
country club for dinner. As befitted an almost ambassador.

IT was late by the time Edward and Mary arrived at the country club
There was only a sprinkling of guests'left in the dining room. They
stared, watching as Mary sat down, and whispered to one, another.

Edward looked at his wife and felt guilty. He was responsible for her turning down the Presiden's offer, and his reasons were valid. But there's more to it than that, Edward admitted to himself I was jealous. I reacted like a spoiled brat. What would have happened if the President had made me an offer like that? I'd probably have jumped at it. All I could think of was that I wanted Mary to stay home and take care of me and the kids.

He sat there admiring Mary. I'll make it up to her, he thought. I'll surprise her this summer with a trip to Paris and London. Maybe Remania. We'll have a real honeymoon. "Any regrets?" he asked her.

Of course there were regrets. But they were castle-in-Spain regrets about the kind of glamorous, impossible dreams that everyone has. Mary smiled. "None, darling. It was a fluke that they even asked me." She took Edward's hand in hers. "I'm glad I refused the offer."

Edward leaned across the table and kissed his wife. "I love you so much, Mary."

"I love you twice as much, darling."

AT THREE o'clock in the morning, when Edward and Mary were fast asleep, the phone exploded into sound. Edward sleepily reached for the instrument and brought it to his ear. "Hello.-. .

A woman's urgent voice said, "Dr. Ashley?"

"Yes?"

"Pete Grimes is havin' a heart attack. He's in pain somethin' awful. I
think he's dyin'. I don't know what to do."

Edward sat up in bed, trying to blink the sleep away. "Don't do
anything.]Keep him still. I'll be there in half an hour." He slid out
of bed and sewed to dress.

"Edward, whays wrong?" Mary mumbled.

"Everything's fine. Go back to sleep."

Five minutes later Edward was on his way to the Grimes farm. It was a
cold and raw morning, with a northwesterly wind driving the temperature
well below zero. He turned the car onto Route j18, the two-lane highway
that went through junction City. The town was asleep, its houses
huddled against the bitter, frigid wind.

When Edward came to the end of Sixth Street, he made the turn that took
him onto Route 57- How many times had he driven over this. road on hot
summer days, with the sweet smell of corn and prairie hay in the air?
And how many winters had he driven on this road through a frosted
landscape, with power lines delicately laced with ice, and lonely smoke
from far-off chimneys?

Edward thought of Mary lying in their warm bed waiting for him. He was
so lucky. I'll make everything up to her, he promised himself

Ahead, at the junction of Highways 57 and 77, was a stop

sign. Edward came to a halt and looked up and down the deserted road. As he started into the intersection a truck appeared out of nowhere. He heard a sudden roar, and his car was pinned by two bright headlights racing toward him. He caught a glimpse of the giant five-ton army truck bearing down on him, and the last sound he heard was his own voice screaming.

IN NEUILLY church bells pealed out across the quiet noon air. The gendarmes guarding Marin Groza's villa had no reason to pay attention to the dusty Renault sedan that was cruising by. Angel drove slowly, although not slowly enough to arouse suspicion, taking everything in. There were two guards in front, a high wall, probably electrified, and inside" of course, would be the usual electronic nonsense of beams, sensors, and alarms. It would take an army to storm the villa. But I don't need an army, Angel thought. Only my genius. Marin Groza is a dead man. If only my mother were alive to see how rich I have become. ow happy it would have made her.

In Argentina podr families were very poor indeed, and Angel's mother had been of the poorest. Through the years Angel had watched friends and relatives die of hunger and sickness. Death was a way of life, and Angel thought philosophically, Since it is going to happen anyway, why not make a profit from it? In the beginning there were those who doubted Angel's lethal talents, but people who tried to put

roadblocks in the way had a habit of disappearing. Angel's reputation as an assassin grew. I have never failed, Angel thought. I am Angel. The Angel of Death.

Chapter Five

THE snow-covered Kansas highway was ablaze with flashing red lights that turned the frosty air blood red. In the center of a circle of vehicles, ringed by headlights, sat the five-ton M871 army tractor-trailer, and partially beneath it, Edward Ashley's crumpled car. A dozen police officers and firemen were milling around, trying to keep warm in the predawn freeze. In the middle of the highway, covered by a tarpaulin, was a body.

A sheriffs car skidded to a stop, and Mary Ashley ran out of it. She was trembling so hard that she could barely stand. Sheriff Monster grabbed her arm. "I wouldn't look at him if I were you, Mrs. Ashley."

"Let go of me!" She was screaming. She shook loose from his grasp and started toward the tarpaulin.

"Please, Mrs. Ashley. You don't want to see what he looks like." He caught her as she fainted.

She woke up in the back seat of Sheriff Monster's car. He was sitting in the front seat watching her. The heater was on, and the car was stifling. Mary stared out the window at all the flashing red lights,and

thought, It's a scene from hell. In spite of the heat, her teeth were chattering. "How did- How did it h-happen?"

"He ran the stop sign. An army truck was comin' along Seventyseven and tried to avoid im, but your husband drove right out in front of him."

She closed her eyes and saw the truck bearing down on Edward and felt his panic. All she could say was, "Edward was a c-careful driver. He would never run a stop sign."

The sheriff said sympathetically, "Mrs. Ashley, we have eyewitnesses. A priest and two nuns, and a Colonel Jenkins from ,Fort Riley. They all said your husband ran the stop sign."

Everything after that seemed to happen in slow motion. Finally, she watched as Edward's body was lifted into the ambulance.

Sheriff Monster said, "They returned him to the morgue. I'd best get you back home. What's the name of your family doctor?"

"Edward Ashley," Mary said. "Edward Ashley is my family doctor."

LATER MARY REMEMBERED WALKING Up to the house and Sheriff Monster leading her inside. Florence and Douglas Schiller were waiting for her in the living room. The children were still asleep.

Florence threw her arms around Mary. "Oh, darling, I'm 'so terribly, terribly sorry."

"It's all right. Edward had an accident." Mary giggled.

Douglas Schiller looked into her eyes. They were wide and vacant. He
felt a chill go through him. "Come on, I'm putting you to bed."

He gave her a sedative, helped her into bed, and sat at her side. An
hour later Mary was still awake. He gave her another sedative. Then a
third. Finally she slept.

IN JUNenON City there are strict investigative procedures involved in
the report of a lone injury accident. An ambulance is dispatched from
the county Ambulance Service, and a sheriff's officer is sent to the
scene. If army personnel are involved in the accident, the CID-the
Criminal Investigating Division of the army-conducts an investigation
along with the sheriff's office.

Shel Planchard, a plainclothes officer from CID headquarters at Fort
Riley, and the sheriff were examining the accident report in the
sheriffs office.

"It beats me," Sheriff Monster said.

"What's the problem, Sheriff?" Planchard asked.

"Well, looky here. There were five witnesses to the accident,

right? A priest and two nuns, Colonel Jenkins, and the truck driver,
every single one of them says- exactly the same thing: car ran the stop
sign, turned onto the highway, and was hit by the army truck." Sheriff
Monster scratched his head. "Mister, have you ever seen an accident

report where even two eyewitnesses said the same thing?"

"It just shows that what happened was pretty obvious."

"There's somethin' else nigglin' at me. What were a priest and two nuns and a colonel doing out on Highway Seventy-seven at three thirty in the morning?"

"Nothing mysterious about that. The priest and the sisters were on their way to Leonardville. Colonel Jenkins was returning to Fort Riley."

The sheriff said, "I checked with the Department of Motor Vehicles. The last ticket Doc Ashley got was six years ago, for illegal parking. He had no accident record."

"Sheriff," said the CID man, "Just what are you suggesting?"

Monster shrugged. "I'm not suggestin' anythin'. I jest have a funny feelin' about this."

"If you think there's some kind of conspiracy involved, there's a big hole in your theory. If-"

The sheriff sighed. "I know. If it wasn't an accident, all the army truck had to do was knock him off and keep going'. There wouldn't be any reason for all these witnesses and rigmarole."

"Exactly." The CID man rose and stretched. "Well, I've got to get back to the base. As far as I'm concerned, the driver of the truck, Sergeant Wallis, is cleared. Are we in agreement?"

Sheriff Monster said reluctantly, "Yeah."

MARY Ashley decided later that the only thing that saved her sinity was being in a state of shock. Everything that happened seemed to be happening to someone else. She was underwater, moving slowly, hearing voices from a distance.

The church was filled to overflowing. There were dozens of wreaths and bouquets. On 'e of the largest wreaths had a card that read simply "My deepest sympathy. Paul Ellison."

The casket with Edward's body in it was closed. Mary could not bear to think of the reason.

The minister was speaking. "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling . place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth doth change, and though the mountains be shaken into the heart of the seas. . . ."

She and Edward were in the small sailboat on Milford Lake.

"Do you like to sail?" he had asked on their first date.

"I've never been sailing."

"Saturday," he said. "We have a date."

They were married one week later.

"Do you know why I married you, lady?" Edward teased.

"You passed the
test. You laughed a lot and you didn't fall overboard."

When the service ended, Mary, Beth, and Tim got into the long black
limousine that led the funeral procession to the cemetery. Because of
the numbing cold, the graveside ceremony was kept brief.

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he
were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me
shall never die. I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am
alive for evermore."

Finally, mercifully, it was over. Mary and the children watched the
casket being lowered into the frozen, unearing earth. Goodbye, my
darling.

IN AN office at CID headquarters Shel Planchard, the CID officer, was
talking to Colonel Jenkins. "i'm afraid I have some bad news, sir.
Sergeant Wallis, the driver of the truck that killed the civilian doctor
... He had a fatal heart attack this morning."

"That's a shame," said Colonel Jenkins.

"Yes, sir," the CID man said'. "His body is being cremated this
morning. It was very sudden."

"Unfortunate. Well, I won't be here much longer. I'm being transferred
overseas." Jenkins allowed himself a small smile. "A rather important
promotion."

"Congratulations, sir. You've earned it."

Edward's death was the beginning of an unbearable hell for Mary Ashley.
Everything within her screamed to deny what had happened to him, but the
reality kept hitting her in fresh waves of shock.

Florence and Douglas and other friends often stayed with her, trying to
make things easier, but Mary wished they would go away and leave her
alone. When it was time to dispose of Edward's personal things,
Florence offered to help her, but Mary said, "No. Edward would have
wanted me to do it."

There were so many small, intimate things. Moving like an automaton,
she ran her fingers over suits he would never again wear. The blue tie
he had worn on their last night together. His gloves and scarf that
kept him warm. He would not need them in his cold grave.

She found love notes they had written to each other, bringing back
memories of the lean days when Edward started his own practice, a
Thanksgiving dinner without a turkey, summer picnics and winter sleigh
rides, her first pregnancy and both of them reading and playing
classical music to Beth while she was in the womb, the love letter
Edward wrote when Tim was born, and a hundred other wonderful things
that brought tears to her eyes. His death was like some cruel magician's
trick.

Edward was everywhere. He was in the songs Mary heard on the radio, in
the hills they had driven through together. He was in bed

at her side
when she awoke at sunrise.

She began to talk to him: I'm worried about the children, Edward. They don't want to go to school. Beth says they're afraid that when they get home, I won't be here. The dean wanted to know whether I planned to go back to teaching at the university. I told im not now. The children need me too much. Do you think Is

-,Would go back one day?

Edward would never leave her and the children. He was there, somewhere.

THERE was a popular bar on the Boulevard Bineau that Marin' Groza's guards frequented when they were not on duty at the villa in Neuilly.
Angel selected a table where conversations could be overheard. The guards, away from the rigid routine of the villa, liked to drink, and when they drank, they talked. Angel listened, seeking the villa's vulnerable point. There was always a vulnerable point. One simply had to be clever enough to find it.

It was three days before Angel overheard a conversation that gave the clue to the solution of the problem. A guard was saying, "Groza sure whips himself viciously. You should hear the screaming that goes on every Friday night. last week I got a look at the whips he keeps in his closet. . .

It was all Angel needed.

Early the following morning Angel changed rental cars and drove a Fiat into Paris. The shop was on the Place Pigalle, in a section populated by prostitutes. Angel went inside, walking slowly along the aisles, carefully studying the merchandise. At length Angel selected a whip, paid cash for it, and left.

The next afternoon Angel brought the whip back to the shop. The manager looked up and growled, "No refunds."

"I don't want a refund," Angel explained. "I feel awkward carrying this around. I would appreciate it if you would mail it for me. I'll pay extra, of course."

That evening Angel was on a plane to Buenos Aires.

THE whip, carefully wrapped, arrived at the villa in Neuilly the following day. It was intercepted by the guard at the gatehouse. He opened the package and examined the whip with great care, thinking, You would think the old man had enough of these already. He passed it through, and another guard took it to Marin Groza's bedroom closet, where he placed it with the other whips.

Mary was preparing dinner when the telephone rang, and she picked it up, an operator said, "This is the White House. The President is calling Mrs. Edward Ashley. Please hold."

Moments later the familiar voice was on the line. "Mrs. Ashley, this is Paul Ellison. I just want you to know how terribly sorry we are

about your husband. I understand he'was a fine man."

"Thank you, Mr. President. It was kind of you to send flowers."

"I don't want to intrude on your privacy, Mrs. Ashley, and I know It's
been a very short time, but now that your domestic situation has
changed, I'm asking you to reconsider my offer of an ambassadorship."

"Thank you, but I couldn't possibly-"

"Hear me out, please. I'm having someone fly out there to talk to you.
His name is Stanton Rogers. I would appreciate it if you would at least
meet with him."

She did not know what to say. How could she explain that her life had
been shattered, that all that mattered now were Beth and Tim? "I'll
meet with him, Mr. President," she said. "But I won't change my mind."

Stanton Rogers telephoned Mary right after the Presiden's call. "I
promise to make my visit as brief as possible, Mrs. Ashley. I plan to
fly in Monday afternoon to see you, if That's all right."

He's such an important man and he's being so polite, Mary thought. "That
will be fine." In a reflex action she asked, "Would you care to have
dinner with us?"

He hesitated, thinking what a boring evening it would be. "Thank you,"
he said.

Stanton Rogers was a formidable man, Mary decided. She

had seen him on
Meet the Press and in news photographs, but she thought, He looks bikeer
in person. He was polite, but there was, something distant about him.

"Permit me to convey again the Presiden's sincere regrets about your
terrible tragedy, Mrs. Ashley."

"Thank you." Mary introduced him to Beth and Tim. They made small talk
while she went to check the pot roast.

When Mary had told Florence Schiller that Stanton Rogers was coming for
dinner and that she was making a pot roast, Florence -had said, "People
like Mr. Rogers don't eat pot roast."

"Oh? What do they eat?" Mary had asked.

"Chateaubriand and crepes suzette."

"Well, we're having pot roast."

Along with the pot roast Mary had prepared creamed mashed potatoes,
fresh vegetables, and a salad. She had baked a pumpkin pie for dessert.
Stanton Rogers finished everything on -his plate.

During dinner Mary and he talked about the colorful history of junction
City. Finally he brought the conversation around to Remania. "Do you
think there will be a revolution there?" he asked.

"Not in the present circumstances. The only man powerful enough to
depose lonescu is Marin Groza, who's in exile."

The questioning went on. Mary Ashley was an expert on the iron curtain

countries, and Stanton Rogers was impressed.

The President was right, he thought. She really is an authority on
]Remania. And there is something more. She's beautiful. She and the
children make an all-American package that will sell. Stanton found
himself getting more and more excited by the prospect. She can be more
useful than she realizes.

At the end of the evening Stanton Rogers said, "Mrs. Ashley, I'm going
to be frank with you. Initially I was against the President appointing
you to a post as sensitive as Remania. I told him as much. I tell you
this now because I've changed my mind. I think you will make an
excellent ambassador."

Mary shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rogers. I'm no politician. I'm
an amateur."

"Mrs. Ashley, some of our finest ambassadors have been amateurs. That
is to say, their experience was not in the Foreign Service. Walter
Annenberg, our former ambassador to the United Kingdom, was a publisher.
John Kenneth Galbraith, our ambassador to India, was a professor. I
could give you a dozen more examples. These people were all what you
would call amateurs. What they had, Mrs. Ashley, was intelligence, a
love for their country, and goodwill toward the people of the country
where they were sent to serve."

"You make it sound so simple."

"As you're probably aware, you've already been
investigated. You've been
approved for a security clearance. You're an expert on
]Remania. And
last but not least, you have the kind of image the
President wants to
project in the iron curtain countries."

Mary's face was thoughtful. "Mr..Rogers, I appreciate
what you're
saying. But I can't accept. I have Beth and Tim to think
about. I
can't just uproot them like-"

"There's a fine school for diplomats' children in
Bucharest," Rogers
told her. "It would be a wonderful education for them.
They'd learn
things they could never learn in school here."

The conversation was not going the way Mary had planned.
"I don't- I'll
think about it."

"I'm staying in town overnight," Stanton Rogers said.
"I'll be at the
All Seasons Motel. Believe me, Mrs. Ashley, I know what
a big decision
this is for you. But this program is important not only
to the
President but to our country. Please think about that."

When Rogers left, Mary went upstairs. The children were
waiting for
her, wide awake and excited.

"Are you going to take the job?" Beth asked.

"We have to have a talk. If I did decide to accept it, it
would mean
that you would have to leave school and all your friends.
You would be
living in a foreign country where we don't speak the
language, and you

would be going to a strange school."

"Tim and I talked about all that," Beth said, " and you know what we think? Any country would be really lucky to have you as an ambassador, Mom."

Mary talked to Edward that night: He made it sound as though the President really needed me, darling. I have the chance again, and I don't know what to do. To tell -you the truth, I'm terrified. This is our home. How can I leave it? This is all I have left of you. Please help me decide.... She found that she was crying.

She sat by the window for hours, looking out at the trees shivering in the howling, restless wind.

At nine o'clock in the morning Mary telephoned Stanton Rogers. "Mr. Rogers, would you please tell the President that I will be honored to accept his nomination for the ambassadorship."

As HE always did on Friday nights, Marin Groza shut his bedroom door, went to the closet, and selected a whip. Once he had made his choice, he took off his robe, exposing his back, which was covered with cruel welts. His expression was full of anguish as he raised the leather whip and cracked it down hard against his back.

Groza flinched with pain each time the tough leather beat against his skin. Once ... twice ... again ... and again, until the vision he had been waiting for came to him. With each lash, scenes of his wife

and daughter being tortured scared through his brain. With each lash,
he could hear them beg for mercy.

Suddenly he stopped, holding the whip in midair. He was having
difficulty breathing. "Help! Help-"

Ley Pastemak heard Groza's cry for help and came running in, gun in
hand. He was too late. He watched as Groza toppled to the floor, his
eyes open, staring at nothing.

Pastemak summoned the doctor, who lived in the villa and came into
Groza's room within minutes. He bent down to examme the body. The skin
had turned blue, and the muscles were flaccid. He picked up the whip
and smelled it.

"What is it?" asked Pastemak. "Poison?"

The doctor nodded. "Curare. It's an extract from a South American
plant. The Incas used it on darts to kill their enemies. Within three
minutes the entire nervous system is paralyzed."

The two men stood staring helplessly at their dead leader.

THE NEws OF MAWN GROZA'S assassination was carried all over the world by
satellite. Ley Pastemak was able to keep the details away from the
press. In Washington, D.C., the President had a meeting with Stanton
Rogers.

"Who do you think's behind it, Stan?"

"Either the Russians or lonescu. In the end it comes to the same thing,

doesn't it? They didn't want the status quo disturbed."

"So we'll be dealing with Ionescu. Very well. Let's push the Mary
Ashley appointment through as quickly as possible."

"She'll be here soon, Mr. President. No problem."

"Good."

ON hearing the news, Angel smiled and thought, It happened sooner than I
expected it would.

At ten p.m. the Controller's private phone rang, and he picked it up.
"Hello."

He heard the sound of Neusa Mufiez's guttural voice. "Angel say to
deposit the money in his bank account."

"Inform him that it will be taken care of immediately. And Miss Mufiez,
tell Angel how pleased I am. Also tell him that I may need him again
very soon. Do you have a telephone number where I can reach you?"

There was a long pause, then, "I guess so." She gave it to him.

"Fine. If Angel-" The line went dead.

IT was more than packing up a household, Mary thought. It was packing
up a life. It was bidding farewell to thirteen years of dreams,
memories, love. It was saying a final good-bye to Edward. This had
been their home, and now it would become merely a house again, occupied
by strangers with no awareness of the joys and sorrows and tears and

laughter that had happened within these walls.

Besides packing, there were so many other practical details. An
indefinite leave of absence from the university had been arranged with
the dean. The children had been withdrawn from their school. There had
been travel arrangements to make, airline tickets to buy, the house to
rent. In the past Mary had taken all the financial transactions for
granted, because Edward had been there to handle them. Now there was no
Edward, except in her mind and in her heart, where he would always be.

Finally, miraculously, everything was ready. It was time to leave.

Mary walked upstairs to the bedroom she and Edward had shared for so
many wonderful years. She stood there taking a long last look.

Chapter Six

WHEN their plane landed at Washington's Dulles Airport, Mary and the
children were met by a young man from the State Department.

"Welcome to Washington, Mrs. Ashley. My name is John Bums. Mr..
Rogers asked me to meet you and see that you get to your hotel safely.
I've checked you in at the Riverdale Towers. I think you'll all be
comfortable there."

"Thank you." Mary introduced Beth and Tim.

"If you'll give me your baggage-claim checks, Mrs. Ashley, I'll see

that everything is taken care of "

Twenty minutes later they were all seated in a chauffeur-driven limousine, heading toward the center of Washington.

PETE Connors, head of the counterintelligence section of the CIA, was working late, and his day was far from over. Every morning at three a.m. a team reported to prepare the Presiden's daily intelligence checklist, collected from overnight cables. The report, code-named Pickles, had to be ready by six a.m. so that it could be on the Presiden's desk at the start of his day. An armed couner earned the list to the White House, entering at the west gate. Pete Connors had a renewed interest in the interceptedcable traffic coming from behind the iron curtain, because much of it concerned the appointment of Mary Ashley as the American ambassador to Remania.

The Soviet Union was worried that President Ellison's plan was a ploy to penetrate their satellite countries, to spy on them or seduce them.

The Commies aren't as worried as I am, Pete Connors thought grimly. If the Presiden's idea works, this whole country is going to be open house for their slimy spies.

Pete Connors had been informed the moment Mary Ashley landed in Washington. He had seen photographs of her and the children. She's going to be perfect, Connors thought happily.

THE Riverdale Towers, one block away from the Watergate,

is a small
family hotel with comfortable, nicely decorated suites.

No sooner had Mary checked in than Stanton Rogers telephoned. "Good evening, Mrs. Ashley." It was like hearing the voice of an'old friend.
"I thought it would be a good idea if we met to discuss some of the procedures you'll be going through. Why don't we make it lunch tomorrow at the Grand?"

It was starting.

The following morning Mary arranged for the children to have room service,, and at one o'clock a taxi dropped her off at the Grand Hotel.
Mary looked at it in awe. The Grand Hotel is its own center of power.
Heads of state and diplomats from all over the world stay there, and it is easy to see why. It is an elegant building, with an imposing lobby that has Italian marble floors and gracious columns under a circular ceiling. There is a landscaped courtyard, with a fountain and an outdoor swimming pool. A marble staircase leads down to the promenade restaurant, where Stanton Rogers was waiting for her.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Ashley."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Rogers."

He laughed. "That sounds so formal. What about Stan and Mary?"

She was pleased. "That would be nice."

When they had ordered lunch, Mary said, "Stan, will I be in Washington

long?"

"About a month. We'll do everything we can to expedite your move. just
between us, there have already been private discussions between the two
governments. There will be no problem with the Remanians, but you still
have to pass the Senate."

So the Remanian government is going to accept me, Mary thought. Perhaps
I'm better qualified than I realized.

"There will be an open hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations
Committee.. That's scheduled for nine o'clock on Wednesday morning.
They vote, and when they. turn in their report, the full Senate votes."

Mary said slowly, "Nominations have been voted down in the past, haven't
they?"

"Yes. But you'll have the full backing of the White House. The
President is eager to push, your appointment through as quickly as
possible. Incidentally, he would like to meet with you this afternoon.
Would four o'clock be convenient?"

Mary swallowed. "Yes, I- Of course."

"Excellent. A car will be downstairs for you at three thirty."

PAUL Ellison rose as Mary was ushered into the Oval Office. He walked
over to shake her hand, grinned, and said, "Gotcha!"

Mary laughed. "I'm glad you did, Mr. President. This is a great honor

for me."

"Sit down, Mrs. Ashley. May I call you Mary?"

"Please." They sat down on the couch.

President Ellison said, "You're going to be my doppelgnger. Do you know what that is?"

"It's a kind of identical spirit of a living person."

"Right. And That's us. I can't tell you how excited I was when I read your latest article, Mary. It was as though I were reading something I had written myself. There are a lot of people who don't believe our people-to-people plan can work, but you and I are going to fool them."

Our people-to-people plan. He's a charmer, Mary thought. Aloud she said, "I want to do everything I can to help, Mr. President."

"I'm counting on you. Very heavily. Remania is the testing ground. Since Groza was assassinated, your job is going to be more difficult. If we can pull it off there, we can make it work in the other communist countries."

They spent the next thirty minutes discussing some of the problems that lay ahead, and then Paul Ellison said, "Stan Rogers will keep in close touch with you. He's become a big fan of yours." He held out his hand. "Good luck, doppelgnger."

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE SENATE Foreign Relations Committee hearing Mary was

in panic. Oh, Edward, how I wish you were here with me. What am I going to tell them, darling? That in junction City I was homecoming queen?

Then the irony struck her. If Edward were alive, she would not be here. She'd be safe and warm at home with her husband and children, where she belonged.

She lay awake all night.

THE hearing was held in the Foreign Relations Committee room, with the full seventeen committee members seated on a dais. Along the left side of the room was the press table, filled with reporters, and in the center were seats for two hundred spectators. The room was filled to overflowing. Pete Connors sat in the back row. There was a sudden hush as Mary entered with Beth and Tim.

Mary was wearing a dark tailored suit and a white blouse. The children were in their Sunday best.

Ben Cohn, the political reporter for the Washington Post, watched as they came in. Goodness, he thought; they look like a Norman Rockwell painting.

An attendant seated the children in a front row, and Mary was escorted to the witness chair, facing the committee.

The questions started innocently enough. Senator Charles Campbell, the chairman of the committee and a supporter of President Ellison, spoke

first. "According to the biography we've been furnished, Mrs. Ashley,
you're a native of Kansas, and for the last several years you've taught
political science at Kansas State University. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir." Mary was so nervous she could barely speak.

"Your grandparents were Remanian?"

"My grandfather. Yes, sir."

"An article you wrote was published in Foreign Affairs magazine and came
to the attention of the President?"

"That's my understanding."

"Mrs. Ashley, would you kindly tell this committee what the basic
premise of your article is?"

"Several regional economic pacts currently exist in the world, and
because they are mutually exclusive they serve to divide the world into
antagonistic and competitive blocs." She felt as though she were
conducting a seminar, and her nervousness began to disappear.

"My premise is simple," she continued. "I would like to see our country
spearhead a movement to form a common market that includes allies and
adversaries alike. Today, as- an example, we're paying billions of
dollars to store surplus grain,,while people in dozens of countries are
starving. The one-world common market could cure inequities of
distribution, at fair market prices. I would like to try to make that

happen."

Senator Harold Turkel, a senior member of the committee and a leader of
the opposition party, spoke up. "I'd like to ask the nominee a few
questions. Is this your first time in Washington, Mrs. Ashley?"

"Yes, sir. I think It's one of the most-"

"Have you ever been to New York?"

"No, sir."

"California?"

"No, sir."

"Have you, in fact, ever been outside the state of Kansas?"

"Yes. I gave a lecture at the University of Chicago and a series of
talks in Denver and Atlanta."

"That must have been very exciting for you, Mrs. Ashley," Turkel said
dryly. "You expect to represent the United States in an iron curtain
country, and you're telling us that your entire knowledge of the world
comes from living in junction City, Kansas."

Mary held back her temper. "No, sir. My knowledge of the world comes
from studying it. I have a Ph.D. in political science, and I've been
teaching at Kansas State University for five years, with an emphasis on
the iron curtain countries. I'm familiar with the current problems of
the Remanian people, and with what their government thinks of the United

States and why. I-" She broke off, afraid she had gone too far. And
then, to her surprise, the committee started to applaud. All except
Turkel.

The questioning went on. One hour later Senator Campbell asked, "Are
there any more questions?"

"I think the nominee has expressed herself very clearly," one of the
Senators commented.

"I agree. Thank you, Mrs. Ashley. This session is adjourned.

Pete Connors studied Mary thoughtfully a moment, then quietly left as
the members of the press swarmed around her.

"Turn this way, Mrs. Ashley. Smile, please. One more.

"Mrs. Ashley-"

Ben Cohn stood apart from the others, watching and listening. She's
good, he thought; she has all the right answers. But there was
something about her nomination that puzzled him. The problem was that
he was not sure what it was.

When Mary arrived back at the hotel, emotionally drained, Stanton Rogers
telephoned. "Hello, Madam Ambassador."

She felt giddy with relief "You mean I'm going to make it? Oh, Stan, I
can't tell you how excited I am."

"So am I, Mary." His voice was filled with pride. "So am I."

THE final confirmation was almost a formality. The full Senate voted
Mary in by a comfortable majority. President Ellison said to. Stanton
Rogers, "Our plan is under way, Stan. Nothing can stop us now.

Rogers nodded. "Nothing," he agreed.

PETE Connors was in his office when he heard the news. He immediately
wrote out a message and encoded it., One of his men was on duty in the
CIA cable room.

"I want to use the Roger Channel," Connors said. "Wait outside." The
Roger Channel is the CIgs ultraprivate cable system, only for top
executives. The cable was addressed to Sigmund.

MARY Ashley was sworn in as the ambassador to the Socialist Republic of
Remania, and the treadmill began. She was ordered to report to the
Bureau of European Affairs at the State Department. There she was
assigned a small, boxlike office next to the Remanian desk.

James Stickley, the Remanian desk officer, was a career diplomat, with
twenty-five years in the service. He was in his late fifties, with a
foxlike face and pale, cold eyes. He was considered the foremost expert
on the Remanian desk and had fully expected to be appointed ambassador
to Remania. The news about Mary Ashley was a bitter blow. It was bad
enough to have been passed over, but to have lost out to a political
appointee-an unknown hayseed from Kansas-was galling.

He studied Mary Ashley now, as she sat across from his desk.

Mary was also studying Stickley. There is something meanlooking about him, she thought.

"We're going to have to make an instant expert out of you." He handed her an armful of files. "You can start by reading these."

"I'll dedicate my morning to it."

"No. Now I want to introduce you to your military attaches, Colonel William McKinney. And in thirty minutes you're scheduled to begin a language course in Remanian. The course usually takes months, but I have orders to push you through the mill."

Bill McKinney wore mufd, but his military bearing was like a uniform. He was a tall middle-aged man, with a seamed, weathered face.

"Madam Ambassador." His voice was rough and gravelly, as though his throat had suffered an injury.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Mary said. Colonel McKinney was her first staff member, and meeting him gave her a sense of excitement. It seemed to bring her new position much closer. "Have you been to Remania before?"

The colonel and James Stickley exchanged a look.

"He's been there before,"." Stickley replied.

EVERY day Mary and Stickley went through the files of the Remanian desk together.

"I'll be reading the cables you send in," Stickley informed her. "They
will be yellow copies for action, or white copies for information.
Duplicates of your cables will go to Defense, the CIA, the USIA, the
Treasury Department, and a dozen other departments. One of the first
issues you'll be expected to resolve is Americans being, held in
Remanian prisons. We want their release."

"What are they charged with?"

"Espionage, drugs, theft-anything the Remanians want to charge them
with."

Mary wondered how on earth one went about getting a charge of espionage
dismissed.

Right," she said briskly.

"I'm going to give you a package," Stickley announced. "Don't let it out
of your hands. It's for your eyes only. Read it and digest it, and
return it to me personally tomorrow morning." He handed Mary a thick
manila envelope sealed with red tape. "Sign for it, please."

She signed.

During the ride back to the hotel Mary clutched it to her lap, feeling
like a character in a James Bond movie. ,

The children were dressed, up and waiting for her.

Oh, dear, Mary remembered. I promised to take them to a Chinese dinner

and a movie. "Fellas," she said, "we'll have to make our excursion another evening. I have some urgent work to do."

"Sure, Mom."

"Okay."

And Mary thought, Before Edward died, they would have screamed like banshees. But they've had to grow up. She took them both in her arms. "I'll make it up to you," she promised.

The material James Stickley had given her was -incredible. No wonder he wants this right back, Mary thought. There were detailed reports on every important Remanian official, from the President to the minister of commerce. There was a dossier on their private habits, financial dealings, friendships, personal traits, and prejudices. Some of the reading was lurid. Mary was up half the night memorizing the names and peccadilloes of the people with whom she would be dealing.

In the morning she returned the secret documents.

Stickley said, "Now you know everything you should know about the Remanian leaders."

"And then some," Mary murmured.

"There's something you should bear in mind: by now the Remanians also know everything there is to know about you."

"That won't get them far," Mary said.

"No?" Stickley leaned back in his chair. "You're a woman, and you're

alone. You can be sure they've already marked you as an easy target.
They'll play on your loneliness. Every move you make will be watched
and recorded."

He's trying to frighten me, Mary thought. Well, it won't work.

TIME became a blur, a whirlwind of activity that left Mary exhausted.
Besides language lessons, her schedule included a course at the Foreign
Service Institute, briefings at the Defense Intelligence Agency,
meetings with the secretary of international security affairs and with
Senate committees. They all had demands, advice, questions.

On top of all this, a media blitz began. Mary found herself in front of
the cameras on Good Morning America, Meet the Press, and Firing Line.
She was interviewed by the Washington Post, The New York Times, and half
a dozen other important daily papers. She did interviews for the London
Times, Der SViegel, Oggi, and Le Monde. Time magazine and People did
feature articles on her and the children. Mary Ashley's photograph
seemed to be everywhere, and whenever there was a newsbreak about an
event in some far-off corner of the world, she was asked for her
comments. Overnight Mary Ashley and her children became celebrities.

Tim said, "Mom, It's really spooky seeing our pictures on the covers of
all the magazines."

"Spooky is the word," Mary agreed. Somehow she felt

uneasy about the
publicity, and she spoke to Stanton Rogers about it.

"Look on it as a part of your job. The President is trying to create an
image. By the time you arrive in Remania, everyone there will know who
you are."

"THERE'S something weird happening in this town," Ben Cohn said. The
reporter and his girlfriend, Akiko Hadaka, were watching Mary Ashley on
Meet the Press.

The new ambassador to Remania was saying, "I believe that China is
heading for a more humane,, iladividualistic communist society with its
incorporation of Hong Kong and Macao."

"Now, what does that lady know about China?" Cohn muttered. He turned
to Akiko. "You're looking at a housewife from Kansas who's become an
expert on everything overnight."

"She seems very bright," Akiko said.

,: Bright is beside the point. Every time she gives an interview, the
reporters go crazy. It's like a feeding frenzy. How did she get on
Meet the Press? I'll tell you how. Someone decided that Mary Ashley
was going to be a celebrity. The question is who and why."

"I'm supposed to be the one with the devious Oriental mind," Akiko said.
"I think you're making more out of this than necessary." Ben Cohn lit a
cigarette and took an angry puff on it. "You could be right," he

grumbled.

An hour later he telephoned Ian Villiers, chief of press relations for
the State Department.

"Benjie, my boy, what can I do for you?" asked Villiers.

"I need a favor. I understand you're handling the press for our new
ambassador to Remania."

A cautious "Yes ... ?"

"Who's behind her buildu', Ian? I'm interested in-"

"I'm sorry, Ben. That's State Department business. I'm just a hired
hand. You might drop a note to the Secretary."

Hanging.up, Ben made a decision. "I think I'm going to have to go out
of town for a few days," he told Akiko.

"Where are you going, baby?"

"Junction City, Kansas."

As it turned out, Ben Cohn was in Junction City for only one day. He
spent an hour talking to Sheriff Monster, then drove a rental car to
Fort Riley, where he visited the CID office. He caught a late afternoon
flight home.

As Ben Cohn's plane took off, a person-to-person telephone call was
placed from the fort to a number in Washington, D.C.

MARY Ashley was walking down the long corridor of the European Affairs
section of the State Department, on her way to report to James Stickley,

when she heard a deep male voice behind her say, "Now, That's what I call a perfect ten."

Mary spun around. A tall stranger was leanin against a wall, staring at her, an insolent grin on his face. He was dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and tennis shoes, and he looked scruffy and unshaven. There were laugh lines around his mouth, and his eyes were a bright, mocking blue. There was an air of arrogance about him that was infuriating. Mary turned on her heel and angrily walked away, conscious of his eyes following her.

The conference with James Stickley lasted for more than an hour. When Mary returned to her office, the stranger was seated in her chair, his feet on her desk, looking through her papers. She could feel the blood rising to her face.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?"

The man gave her a long, lazy look and slowly got to his feet. "i'm Mike Slade. My friends call me Michael."

She said icily, "What can I do for you, Mr. Slade?"

"Nothing, really," he said easily. "We're neighbors. I work here in the department, so I thought I'd come by and say hello."

"You've said it. I assume you have your own desk, so in the future you won't have. to sit at my desk and snoop."

"Well, well, it has a temper! I heard the Kansians, or whatever you people call yourselves, were supposed to be friendly

folks."

"Mr. Slade, I'll give you two seconds to get out of my office."

"I must have heard wrong," he mumbled to himself.

"And if you really work here, I'd suggest you go home and shave and put on some proper clothing."

He waved his hand at her. "Bye, honey. I'll be seeing you."

Oh, no, Mary thought. No, you won't.

The next morning when Mary arrived for her daily session with Stickley, Mike Slade was there as well.

He grinned at Mary. "Hi. I took your advice and shaved."

Stickley looked from one to the other. "You two have met?"

Mary gritted her teeth. "Not really. I found him. snooping at my desk."

James Stickley said, "Mrs. Ashley, Mike Slade. Mr. Slade is going to be your deputy chief of mission."

Mary stared at him. "He's what?"

"Mr. Slade is on the East European desk. He usually works out of Washington now, but he spent four years in Remania, and It's been decided to assign him to work with you."

"No!" she protested. "That's impossible."

"Mrs. Ashley, Mike Slade happens to be our top field

expert on East
European affairs. Your job is to make friends with the natives. My job
is to see to it that you get all the help I can give you. And his name
is Mike Slade. I really don't want to hear any more about it. Do I
make myself clear?"

Mike said mildly, "I promise to shave every day."

Mary turned to Stickley. "I thought an ambassador was permitted to
choose her own deputy chief of mission."

"That is correct, but-"

"Then I am unchoosing Mr. Slade. I don't want him."

"Under ordinary circumstances you would be within your rights, but in
this case I'm afraid you have no choice. The order came from the White
House."

In the days that followed, Mary could not seem to avoid Mike Slade. The
man was everywhere. She ran into him in the Pentagon, in the Senate
dining room, in the corridors of the State Department. He was always
dressed in either denims and a Tshirt or in sport clothes. Mary
wondered how he got away with it in an environment that was so formal.

One day Mary saw him having lunch with Colonel McKinney, her military
attaches. They were engaged in an earnest conversation, and Mary
wondered how close the two men were. Could they be old friends? And
could they be planning to gang up on me? I'm, getting paranoid, Mary

told herself. And I'm not even in Remania yet.

BEN Cohn was seated at a corner table at Mama Regina's when his lunch
guest, Alfred Shuttleworth, arrived. The headwaiter seated him.

"Would you care fora drink, gentlemen?"

Shuttleworth ordered a martini.

"Nothing for me," Ben Cohn said.

Alfred Shuttleworth was a sallow-looking middle-aged man who worked in
the European Affairs section of the State Department. A few years
earlier he had been involved in a drunkdriving accident that Ben Cohn
had covered for his newspaper, Shuttleworth's career had been at stake.
Cohn had killed the story, and Shuttleworth showed his appreciation by
giving him news tips from time to time.

"I need your help, AI."

"Name it, and you've got it."

"I'd like the inside information on our new ambassador to Remania."

Alfred Shuttleworth frowned. "What do you mean?"

"AI, Lindbergh never had a buildup like this. Here's this Cinderella,
who comes out of nowhere, is touched by the magic wand of our President,
and suddenly becomes the nation's number one celebrity and political
savant." Now, I'll admit the lady is pretty but she isn't that pretty.
The lady is bright-but she isn't that bright. I'll tell you something

else That's out of killer. I flew to junction City, Kansas, her hometown, and talked to the sheriff there." Ben Cohn paused.

"Go on," Shuttleworth said.

"Mrs. Ashley originally turned down the President because her husband couldn't leave his medical practice. Then he was killed in a convenient auto accident. Voildl The lady's in Washington, on her way to Bucharest. Exactly as someone had planned from the beginning."

"Someone? Who?"

"That's the jackpot question."

"Ben, what are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. Let me tell you what Sheriff Monster suggested. He thought it was peculiar that half a dozen people showed up in the middle of a freezing winter night just in time to Witness the accident. And do you want to hear something even more peculiar? They've all disappeared."

"Go on."

"The driver of the army truck that killed Dr. Ashley is dead of a heart attack. Twenty-seven years old. Colonel Jenkins-the officer in charge of the army investigation, as well as one of the witnesses to the accident-he's been promoted and transferred. No one seems to know where."

Shuttleworth shook his head. "Ben, I know you're a dam good reporter, but I think you've gone off the track. You're building a few coincidences into a Hitchcock scenario. People do get killed in auto accidents. You're looking for some kind of conspiracy where there is none."

"AI, have you heard of an organization called Patriots for Freedom?"

"No."

"I keep hearing rumors, but there's nothing I can pin down."

"What kind of rumors?"

"It's supposed to be a cabal of high-level right-wing and leftwing fanatics from a dozen Eastern and Western countries. Their ideologies are diametrically opposed, but what brings them together is fear. The communist members think President Ellison's plan is a capitalist trick to destroy the Eastern bloc. The rightwingers believe his plan is an open door that will let the Communists destroy us. So they've formed this unholy alliance."

"I don't believe it."

"There's more. Besides the VIPS, splinter groups from various international security agencies are said to be involved. Do you think you could check it out for me?"

"I don't know, Ben. I'll try."

Shuttleworth was skeptical about Ben Cohn's theory. He liked Ben, and he wanted to help, but he had no idea how to go about tracking down a probably mythical organization. If it really did exist, it would be in some government computer. He himself had no access to the computers.

But I know someone who does, Shuttleworth said to himself. I'll give him a call.

ALFRED Shuttleworth was on his second martini when Pete Connors walked into the bar.

"Sorry I'm late," Connors said. "A minor problem at the pickle factory."

Pete Connors ordered a Scotch, and Shuttleworth ordered another martini.
"Pete," Shuttleworth said, "I need a favor. Could you look up something for me in the CIA computer? It may not be in there, but I promised a friend I'd try."

"Sure," said Connors. "I owe you a few. Who do you want to know about?"

"It's not a who, It's a what. And it probably doesn't even exist. It's an organization called Patriots for Freedom. Have you heard of it?"

Pete Connors carefully set down his drink. "I can't,say that I have, AH. What's the name of your friend?"

"Ben Cohn. He's a reporter for the Post."

THERE was no way to get directly in touch with the Controller. He had
organized and financed Patriots for Freedom, but he never attended
Committee meetings, and he was completely anonymous. He was a telephone
number-untraceable (Connors had tried)-and a recording that said, "You
have sixty seconds in which to leave your message." The number was to be
used only in case of emergencies. Connors stopped at a public telephone
booth to make the call. He talked to the recording.

The message was received at six p.m.

In Buenos, Aires it was eight p.m.

The Controller listened to the message twice, then dialed a number. He
waited for three full minutes before Neusa Mufiez's voice came on.

I's(?"

The Controller said, "This is the man who made arrangements with you
before about Angel. I have another contract for him. Can you get in
touch with him right away?"

"I don' know." She sounded drunk.

The woman was impossible. "Listen to me. Tell Angel I need this done
immediately. I want him to-"

"Wait a minute. I gotta go to the toilet."

The Controller heard her drop the phone. He sat there, filled with
frustration, until she came back on the line. "A lotta beer makes you
go," she announced.

He gritted his teeth. "This is very important. I want you to get a pencil and write this down. I'll speak slowly."

"I WANTED to bring you the good news in person, Mary," said Stanton Rogers. "We just received official word that the Romanian government has approved you as the new ambassador from the United States. Now President Ellison can give you a letter of credence, and you'll be on your way."

"I- I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done, Stan."

"I haven't done anything," Rogers protested. "It was the President who selected you." He grinned. "And I must say, he made the perfect choice. You can do more for our country over there than anyone else I can think of."

"Thank you," she said soberly. "I'll try to live up to that."

It was one of the most thrilling moments of Mary Ashley's life. It seemed almost too good to be true. And for no reason something that Mary's mother used to tell her popped into her mind: "If something seems to be too good to be true, Mary, you can bet it probably is."

THURSDAY morning Angel was in a bad mood. The flight from Buenos Aires to Washington, D.C., had been delayed because of a telephoned bomb threat. The world isn't safe anymore, Angel thought angrily.

The hotel room that had been reserved in Washington was too modern,
too-what was the word?-plastic. That was it. In Buenos Aires
everything was autgntico. I'll finish this contract and get back home,
Angel thought. The job is simple, almost an insult to my talent, but
the money is excellent.

Angel's first stop was an electrical supply store, then a paint store,
and finally a supermarket, where Angel's only purchase was six light
bulbs. The rest of the equipment was waiting in the hotel room in two
sealed boxes marked FRAGILE HANDLE with CARE. Inside the first box were
four carefully packed army-green hand grenades. In the second box was
soldering equipment.

Working very slowly, with :xquisite care, Angel cut the top off the
first grenade, then painted the bottom the same color as the light
bulbs. The next step was to scoop out the explosive from the grenade
and replace it with a seismic explosive. When this was tightly packed,
Angel added lead and metallic shrapnel to it. Then Angel shattered a
light bulb against a table, preserving the filament and threaded base.
It took less than a minute to solder the filament of the bulb to an
electrically activated detonator. The final step was to insert it
gently inside the painted grenade. When Angel was finished, it looked
exactly like a normal light bulb.

Then Angel began to work on the remaining bulbs. After

that, there was
nothing to do but wait for the phone call.

The telephone rang at eight o'clock that evening. Angel picked up the
phone and listened without speaking. After a moment a voice said, "He's
gone."

The Un ride to the apartment building took seventeen minutes.

There was no doorman in the lobby. The target apartment was on the
fifth floor, at the far end of the corridor. The lock was an early
model Schlage, childishly simple to manipulate. Angel was inside the
dark apartment within seconds.

It was the work of a few minutes to replace six light bulbs in the
living room of the apartment. Afterward Angel headed for Dulles Airport
to catch a midnight flight back to Buenos Aires.

That night Ben Cohn was killed by a mysterious explosion in his
apartment. There was a brief item in the press attributing the accident
to a leaky gas stove.

The next day Alfred Shutfleworth was reported missing by his wife. His
body was never found.

STANTON Rogers accompanied Mary and the children to Dulles Airport in a
State Department limousine.

"I want to thank you, Stan. You've been so wonderful," said Mary.

He smiled. "I can't tell you how much pleasure It's given

me."

"I hate to burden you with this, but James Stickley told me that Mike
Slade is going to be my deputy chief of mission. Is there any way to
change that?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Are you having some kind of problem with
Slade?"

"Quite honestly, I don't like him. Is there someone who could replace
him?"

Stanton Rogers said thoughtfully, "I don't know Mike Slade well, but he
has a magnificent record. He's served brilliantly in posts in the
Middle East and Europe. He can give you exactly the kind of expertise
you're going to need."

She sighed. "That's what Mr. Stickley said."

"If you have any problem with him, I want you to let me know. In fact,
if you have problems with anyone, I want you to let me know. I intend
to make sure that you get every bit of help I can give you."

"I appreciate that."

"One last thing. If you have any messages that you want to send to me
without anyone else reading them, the code at the top of the message is
three x's. I'll be the only one to receive that message."

It was only after she and the children were airborne that the enormity
of what was about to happen really struck Mary Ashley. It

was so
incredible that she had to say it aloud. "We're on our way to Remania,
where I'm going to take up my post as ambassador from the United
States."

Beth was looking at her strangely. "Yes, Mother. We know that."

I'm going to be the best ambassador they've ever seen, Mary thought.
Before I'm finished, the United States and Remania are going to be close
allies.

The next instant, Mary's euphoric dreams of-great statesmanship
evaporated, giving way to panic. I'm not a real ambassador, she
thought. I'm a fake. I'm going to get us into a war. God help us.
Dorothy and I should never have left Kansas.

Chapter Seven

OTOPENI Airport, ten miles from the heart of Bucharest, is a modern
airport, built to facilitate the flow of travelers from nearby iron
curtain countries as well as to take care of the lesser number of
Western tourists who visit Remania each year.

Inside the terminal were soldiers in brown uniforms, armed with rifles
and pistols, and there was a stark air of coldness about the building
that had nothing to do with the frigid temperature. Unconsciously Tim
and Beth moved closer to Mary. So they feel it too, she thought.

Two men were approaching. One of them, a slim, athletic

man, introduced
himself. "Welcome to Remania, Madam Ambassador. I'm jerry Davis, your
public affairs consul. This is Tudor Costache, the Remanian chief of
protocol."

"It is a pleasure to have you and your children with us," Costache said.
"Welcome to our country."

In a way, Mary thought, It's going to be my country too. "Mulfumesc,
domnule," she said.

"You speak Romanian!" Costache cried. "Cu pldcerel"

Mary hoped the man was not going to get carried away. "A few words, she
replied hastily.

Tim said, "Bunddimineata." And Mary was so proud she could. have burst.
She introduced Tim and Beth.

jerry Davis said, "Your limousine is waiting for you, Madain Ambassador.
Colonel McKinney is outside."

There was a long line waiting to go through customs, but Mary and the
children were outside the building in a matter of minutes. There were
reporters and photographers at the entrance, but instead of the
free-forealls that Mary had encountered at home, everything was orderly
and controlled. When they had finished, they thanked Mary and departed
in a body.

Colonel McKinney, in army uniform, was waiting at the curb. He held out
his hand. "Good morning, Madam Ambassador. Did you have

a pleasant
trip?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Mike Slade wanted to b ' e here, but there was some important business
he had to take care of."

Mary was relieved.

A long black limousine with an American flag on the right front fender
pulled up. A cheerful-looking man in a chauffeur's uniform held the
door open.

"This is Florian."

The chauffeur grinned. "Welcome, Madam Ambassador. Master Tim. Miss
Beth. It will be my pleasure to serve you."

"Thank you," Mary said.

"Florian will be at your disposal twenty-four hours a day. I thought we
would go directly to the residence so you can unpack and relax. Tomorrow
morning Florian will take you to the embassy."

"That sounds fine," Mary said.

The drive from the airport to the city was fascinating. They drove on a
heavily traveled two-lane highway, but every few miles the traffic would
be held up by plodding Gypsy carts. On both sides of the highway were
modern factories next to ancient huts. The car passed farm after farm,
with women working in the fields, colorful bandannas knotted around
their heads. They drove by an ominous blue-and-gray

building just off
the main highway.

"What is that?" Mary asked.

Florian grimaced. "The Ivan Stelian Prison. That is where they put
anyone who disagrees with the Remanian government."

At last they reached the center of Bucharest, which was very beautiful.
There were parks and monuments and fountains everywhere one looked. Mary
remembered her grandfather saying, "Bucharest is a miniature Paris,
Mary. They even have a replica of the Eiffel Tower." And there it was.
She was in the homeland of her forefathers.

The streets were crowded with people and streetcars, and the limousine
had to honk its way through the traffic.

"The residence is just ahead," Colonel McKinney said as the car turned
into a small tree-lined street.

The ambassador's residence was a large and beautiful oldfashioned
three-story house surrounded by lovely grounds. The staff was lined up
outside, waiting to welcome Mary.

jerry Davis made the introductions. "Mihai, your butler; Rosica, your
housekeeper; Cosma, your chef; and Delia and Carmen, your maids."

Mary moved down the line receiving their bows and curtsies. They all
seemed to be waiting for her to say something. She took a deep breath.
"Bunaziua. Mulfumesc. Nu vorbesc-" Every bit of Remanian she had

learned flew out of her head. She stared at them helplessly.

Mihai, the butler, bowed. "We all speak English, ma'am. We welcome you
and shall be happy to serve your every need."

Mary sighed with relief. "Thank you."

"Let me show you around," jerry Davis said.

On the ground floor there was a library, a music room, a living room, a
large dining room, a kitchen, and a pantry. A terrace ran the length of
the building outside the dining room, facing a large park. At the rear
of the house was an indoor swimming pool.

"Our own swimming pool!" Tim exclaimed. "Can I go swimming?"

"Later, darling. Let's get settled in first."

The pidce de rdsistance was the ballroom, built near the garden. It was
enormous. Glistening Baccarat sconces lined the walls, which were
covered with flocked paper.

jerry Davis said, "This is where the embassy parties are given. Watch
this." He pressed a switch on the wall. There was a gnding noise, and
the ceiling began to split in the center, opening up until the sky
became visible. "It can also be operated manually."

"Hey, That's neatly" Beth exclaimed.

"It's called the Ambassador's Folly," jerry explained. "It's too hot to
keep open in the summer and too cold in the winter. We use it in April

and September." As the cold air started to descend, he pressed the switch and the ceiling closed.

They followed him upstairs to a large central hall that led to the bedrooms.

"The third floor has servants' quarters," jerry continued. "In., the basement is a wine cellar."

"It's-It's enormous," Mary said.

"Which is my room?" Beth asked.

"You and Tim can decide that between yourselves."

"You can have this one," Tim offered. "It's frilly. Girls like frilly things."

The master bedroom was lovely, with a queen-size bed with a goose-down comforter, two couches before a fireplace, a dressing table, and a wonderful view of the garden. Mary was so exhausted she could hardly wait to get into bed.

THE American embassy in Bucharest is a white, semi-Gothic two-story building with. an iron gate in front. The entrance is guarded by a marine officer, and a second marine sits inside a security booth at the side of the gate.

Inside, the lobby isornate. It has a marble floor, two closed circuit television sets at a desk guarded by a marine, and a fireplace. The corridors are lined with portraits of U.S. Presidents. A winding

staircase leads to the second floor, where a conference room and offices are located.

The guard was waiting for Mary at the desk. "Good morning, Madam Ambassador. I'm Sergeant Hughes. They call me Gunny. They're waiting for you upstairs. I'll escort you there."

"Thank you, Gunny." Mary followed him upstairs to a reception room, where a middle-aged woman was sitting behind a desk.

She rose. "Good morning, Madam Ambassador. I'm Dorothy Stone, your secretary."

"How do you do."

Dorothy said, "I'm afraid you have quite a crowd in there."

She opened the door, and Mary walked into the room. There were nine people seated around a large conference table. They rose as Mary entered. They were all staring at her, and she felt a wave of animosity that was almost palpable. The first person she saw was Mike Slade.

"I see you got here safely," Mike said. "Let me introduce you to your department heads. This is Lucas Janklow, administrative consul; Eddie Maltz, political consul; Patricia Hatfield, your economic consul; David Wallace, head of administration; Ted Thompson, agriculture. You've met jerry Davis, your public affairs consul. This is David Victor, commerce consul, and you already know Colonel Bill McKinney."

"Please be seated," Mary said. She sat at the head of the table and
surveyed the group. Hostility comes in all sizes and shapes, Mary
thought. It's going to take time to sort them out.

Mike Slade was saying, "All of us are serving at your discretion. You
can replace any of us at any time."

That's a lie, Mary thought angrily; I tried to replace you.

There was general inconsequential conversation, until Mike Slade said,
"Madam Ambassador, the individual consuls will now brief you on any
serious problems."

Mary resented his taking charge, but she said nothing.

Ted Thompson, the agriculture consul, was the first to speak. "The
Remanian agriculture minister is in worse trouble than he's admitting.
They're going to have a disastrous crop this year, and we can't afford
to let them go under."

The economic consul, Patricia Hatfield, protested. "We've given them
enough aid, Ted. Remania's already operating under a favored-nations
treaty. It's a GSP country." She looked at Mary and said patronizingly,
"A GSP country is-"

"Is a generalized system of preferences," Mary cut in. "We treat
Remania as a less developed country so that they get import and export
advantages."

Hatfield's expression changed. "That's right."

"I'll see what I can do," Mary promised, making a note to herself.

Eddie Maltz, the political consul, spoke up. "I have an urgent problem.
A nineteen-year-old American college student was arrested last night for
possession of marijuana. That's an extremely serious offense here. The
usual penalty is a five-year prison sentence."

How awful, Mary thought. "What can we do about it?"

Mike Slade said lazily, "You can try your charm on the head of the
Securitate. His name is Istrase. He has a lot of power."

Eddie Maltz went on. "The girl says she was framed, and she may have a
point. She was stupid enough to have an affair with a Remanian
policeman. He turned her in."

Mary was horrified. "I'll see if I can do something." She turned to the
public affairs consul, jerry Davis. "Do you have any urgent problems?"

"My department is having trouble getting approvals for repairs on the
apartments our embassy staff live in. Some of our people are without
heat, and in several of the apartments the toilets don't work and
there's no running water."

"Can't they just go ahead and have their own repairs made?"

"No. The Remanian government has to approve all repairs."

"Have you complained about this?"

"Yes, ma'am. Every day for the last three months."

"It's called harassment," Mike Slade explained. "It's a war of nerves
they like to play with us."

Ambassador Ashley was beginning to get a headache.

After the meeting broke up and she and Slade were alone, Mary asked,
"Which one of them is the CIA agent attached to the embassy?"

Mike looked at her a moment. "Why don't you come with me?"

He walked out of the conference room.

Mary followed him down a long corridor. He came to a large door with a
marine guard standing in front of it. The guard stepped aside as Mike
pushed the door open. He turned and gestured for Mary to enter.

She stepped inside and looked around. The room was an incredible
combination of metal and glass, covering the floor, the walls, and the
ceiling.

Mike closed the heavy door behind them. "This is the bubble room. Every
embassy in an iron curtain country has one. It's the only room in the
embassy that can't be bugged."

He saw her look of disbelief.

"Madam Ambassador, not only is the embassy bugged, but you can bet your
residence is bugged, and if you go out to a restaurant, your table will
be bugged. You're in enemy territory."

Mary sank into a chair. "How do you handle that?" she asked. "I mean,
not ever being able to talk freely."

"We do an electronic sweep every morning. We find their bugs and pull
them out. They replace them, and we pull those out."

"Why do we permit Remanians to work in the embassy?"

"It's their playground. They're the home team. We play by their rules
or blow the ball game. They can't get their microphones into this room,
because there are marine guards on duty in front of that door
twenty-four hours a day. Now, what are your questions?"

"I just wondered who the CIA man was."

"Eddie Maltz, your political consul."

Eddie Maltz. He was the middle-aged one, very thin, a sinister face. Or
did she think that now because he was CIA? "Is he the only CIA man on
the staff?"

"Yes." Mike Slade looked at his watch. "You're due to present your
credentials to the Remanian government in thirty minutes. Florian is
waiting for you outside. Take your letter of credence. You'll give the
original to President Ionescu and put a copy in our safe."

Mary found that she was gritting her teeth. "I know that, Mr. Slade."

HEWUARTERS for the Remanian government is a forbidding sandstone
building in the center of Bucharest. It is protected by a steel wall

and surrounded by armed guards. An aide met Mary at the entrance and escorted her upstairs.

President Alexandros Ionescu greeted Mary in a long rectangular room on the second floor. The President had a powerful presence. He was dark, with curly black hair, hawklike features, and one of the most imperious noses Ma had ever seen. His eyes were blazing, mesmerizing. He took Mary's hand and gave it a lingering kiss. "You are even more beautiful than you look in your photographs."

"Thank you, Your Excellency." Mary opened her purse and took out the letter of credence President Ellison had given her.

Ioneseu gave it a careless glance. "Thank you. I accept it on behalf of the]Remanian government. You are now officially the American ambassador to my country." He beamed at her. "I have arranged a reception this evening for you. You will meet some of our people who will be working with you."

"That's very kind of you," Mary said.

He took her hand in his again and said, "I hope you will grow to love our country, Madam Ambassador." He massaged her hand.

"I'm sure I will." He thinks i'm just another pretty face, Mary thought grimly. I'll have to do something about that.

MARY returned to the embassy and spent the rest of the day sifting through the blizzard of white paper on her desk. There were the English

translations of Remanian newspaper and magazine articles, the wireless file and the summary of news developments reported in the United States, a thick report on arms-control negotiations, and an update on the United Slates economy. There's enough reading material in one day, Mary thought, to keep me busy for a week, and I'm going to get this every day.

But the problem that disturbed Mary more was the feeling of antagonism from her staff. That had to be handled immediately. She sent for Harriet Kruger, her protocol officer. "How long have you worked here at the embassy?" Mary asked.

"Four years before our break with Remania, and now three glorious months." There was a note of irony in her voice. "May we have an off-the-record conversation?"

"No, ma'am."

Mary had forgotten. "Why don't we adjourn to the bubble room?" she suggested.

When Mary and Harriet Kruger were seated in the bubble room, Mary said, "Something just occurred to me. Our meeting this morning was held in the conference room. Isn't that bugged?"

"Probably," Harriet said cheerfully. "But it doesn't matter.

Mike Slade wouldn't let anything be discussed that the Romanians aren't already aware of."

Mike Slade. "What do you think of Slade?" Mary asked.

"He's the best."

Mary decided not to express her opinion. "I got the feeling today that
morale around here isn't good. Is it because of me, or has it always
been that way?"

Harriet studied her a moment. "It's a combination of both. The
Americans working here are in a pressure cooker. We're afraid to make
friends with Remanians, because they probably belong to the Securitate,
so we stick together. We're a small group, so pretty soon that gets
claustrophobic." She shrugged. "The pay is small, .the food is lousy,,
and the weather is bad." She studied Mary. "None of that is your fault,
Ambassador Ashley. You have two problems. The first is that you're a
political appointee in charge of an embassy manned by career diplomats."
She stopped. "Am I coming on too strong?"

"No. Please go on."

"Most of them were against you before you even got here. Career workers
in an embassy tend not to rock the boat. Political appointees like to
change things. To them, you're an.amateur telling professionals how to
run their business. The second problem is that you're a woman. The men
in the embassy'don't like taking orders from a woman."

"I see."

Harriet Kruger smiled. "But you sure have a great

publicity agent. I've
never seen so many magazine cover stories in my life. How
do you do it?"

Mary had no answer to that. She was, in fact, disturbed
by the comments
she kept hearing about the amount of publicity she and the
children were
getting. There had even been an article in Pravda, with a
picture of
the three of them.

Harriet Kruger glanced at her watch. "oops! You're going
to be late.
Florian's waiting to take you home so you can change.
Aside from
President Ionescu's reception you have three parties
tonight."

Mary was staring at her. "That's impossible. I have
too-"

"It goes with the territory. There are seventy-five
embassies in
Bucharest, and on any given night some of them are
celebrating
something."

"Can't I say no?"

"That would be the United States saying no to them. They
would be
offended."

Mary sighed. "I guess I'd better go change."

As SOON as Mary arrived at the reception, President
Ionescu walked over
to her. He kissed her hand and said, "I have been looking
forward to
seeing you again."

"Thank you, Your Excellency. I too."

She had a feeling he had been drinking heavily. She recalled the dossier on him: Mained. One son, fourteen-the heir apparentand three daughters. Is a womanizer. Drinks a lot. A shrewd peasant mentality. Charming when it suits him. Generous to his friends. Dangerous and ruthless to his enemies.

Ioescu took Mary's arm and led her off to a deserted corner. "You will find us Remanians interesting." He squeezed her arm. "We are a very passionate people." He looked at her for a reaction, and when he got none, he went on. "We are descendants of the ancient Dacians and their conquerors, the Romans. For centuries we have been Europe's doormat. The.Huns, Goths, Avars, Slays, and Mongols wiped their feet on us, but Remania has survived. And do you know how?" He leaned closer to her. "By giving our people a strong, firm leadership. They trust me, and I rule them well."

Mary thought of some of the stories she had heard. The arrests in the middle of the night, the atrocities, the disappearances.

Ioneseu was about to continue talking when a man came up to him and whispered in his ear. Ionescu's expression turned cold. He hissed something in Remanian, and the man hurried off. The dictator turned back to Mary, oozing charm again. "I must leave you now. I look forward to seeing you again soon."

And Ionescu was gone.

TO GET A Head START ON no crowded day that faced her, Mary had Florian
pick her up at six thirty a.m. During the ride to the embassy she read
the reports and communiques that had been delivered to the residence
during the night.

As Mary walked past Mike Slade's office she stopped in surprise. He was
at his desk working. "You're in early," she said.

He looked up. Morning. I'd like to have a word with you. Not here.
Your office."

He followed Mary through the connecting door to her office, and she
watched as he walked over to an instrument in the corner of the room.
"This is a shredder," Mike informed her.

"I know that."

"Really? Last night you left some papers on top of your desk.

By now they've been photographed and sent to Moscow."

"Oh, no! I must have forgotten. Which ones?" "A list of personal
things you wanted to order. But That's beside the point. The cleaning
women work for the Securitate. Lesson number one: at night everything
must be locked up or shredded."

"What's lesson number two?" Mary asked coldly.

Mike grinned. "The ambassador always starts the day by having coffee
with her deputy chief How do you take yours?"

"I- Black."

"Good. You have to watch your figure around here. The food is
fattening." He started toward the door that led to his office. "I make
my own special brew. You'll like it."

Mary sat there, infuriated by his arrogance. I have to be careful how I
handle him, she decided. I want him out of here as quickly as possible.

He returned with two mugs of steaming coffee.

"How do I arrange for Beth and Tim to start school?" she asked.

"I've already arranged it. Florian will deliver them mornings and pick
them up afternoons."

She was taken aback. "I- Thank you."

"The school is small but excellent. Each class has eight or nine
students. They come from all over-Canadians, Israelis, Nigerians, you
name it." Mike took a sip of his coffee. "I understand that you had a
nice chat with our fearless leader last night."

"President Ionescu? Yes. He seemed very pleasant."

"Oh, he is. Until he gets annoyed with somebody. Don't let Ionescu's
charm fool you. He's a dyed-in-the-wool s.o.b. His people despise him,
but there's nothing they can do ibout it. The secret police are
everywhere. The general rule of thumb here is that one out of every
three people works for the Securitate or the KGB. A Remanian can be
arrested merely for signing a petition."

Mary felt a shiver go through her. "They do have trials here?"

"Oh, occasionally they'll have show trials, but most of the people
arrested manage to have fatal accidents while they're in police custody.
In general, conditions here are horrifying, but the people are afraid to
strike back, because they know they'll be shot. The standard of living
is one of the lowest in Europe. There's a shortage of everything. If
people see a line in front of a store, they'll join in and buy
whatever's for sale while they have the chance."

"It seems to me," Mary said slowly, "that all these things add up to a
wonderful opportunity for us to help them."

Mike Slade looked at her. "Sure," he said dryly. "Wonderful."

That afternoon as Mary was going through some newly arrived cables from
Washington she thought about Mike Slade. He was arrogant and rude, yet
he'd arranged for the children's school. He may be more complex than I
thought, she decided. But I still don't trust him.

THE inside of the Ivan Stelian Prison was even more forbidding than its
exterior. The corridors were narrow, painted a dull gray. There was a
jungle of crowded black-barred cells, patrolled by uniformed guards
armed with machine guns. The stench was overpowering.

A guard led Mary to a small visitors' room, saying, "She's in there. You
have ten minutes."

Mary entered, and the door closed behind her.

Hannah Murphy was seated at a small battle-scarred table. She was
handcuffed and wearing prison garb. Her face was pale and gauss% and
her eyes were red and swollen. Her hair was uncombed. "Hi," Mary said.
"I'm the American ambassador."

Hannah Murphy looked at her and began to sob uncontrollably.

Mary put her arms around the girl and said soothingly, "Every thing is
going to be all right. Now, just tell me what happened."

Hannah Murphy took a deep breath. "I met this man-he was a Remanian-and
I was lonely. He was nice to me, and we- We spent the night together. A
girlfriend had given me some marijuana. I shared it with him. When I
woke up in the morning, he was gone, but the police were there. And
they brought me to this hellhole." She shook her head helplessly. "Five
years."

Mary thought of what Lucas Janklow had said as she was leaving for the
prison: "There's nothing you can do for her. If ghe were a Remanian,
they'd probably give her life." Now Mary looked at Hannah Murphy and
said, "I'll do everything in my power to help you."

Mary had examined the official police report. It was signed by Captain
Aurel Istrase, head of the Securitate. It was brief and unhelpful, but
there was no doubt of the girl's guilt. I'll have to find another way,

Mary thought. Aurel Istrase. The name had a familiar ring. She thought back to the confidential dossier James Stickley had shown her in Washington. She remembered something in there about Captain Istrase....

Mary arranged to meet with the captain the following morning.

AuREL Istrase was a short swarthy man with a scoffed face. He had come to the embassy for the meeting. He was curious about the new American ambassador.

"You wished to talk to me, Madam Ambassador?"

"Thank you for coming. I want to discuss Hannah Murphy."

"Ah, yes. The drug peddler. In Remania we have strict laws about people who sell drugs. They go to jail."

"Excellent," Mary said. "I'm pleased to hear that. I wish we had stricter drug laws in the United States."

Istrase was watching her, puzzled. "Then you agree with me?"

"Absolutely. Anyone who sells drugs deserves jail. Hannah Murphy, however, did not sell drugs. She offered to give some marijuana to a Remanian citizen."

"It is the same thing. If-"

"Not quite, Captain. The Remanian was a lieutenant on your police force. He smoked marijuana too. Has he been punished?"

"He was merely gathering evidence of a criminal act."

"Your lieutenant has a wife and three children?"

Captain Istrase frowned. "Yes."

"Does the lieutenant's wife know' about her husband's affair?"

Captain Istrase stared at her. "Why should she?"

"Because it sounds to me like a clear case of entrapment. I think we
had better make this whole thing public. The international press will
be fascinated."

"There would be no point to that," Istrase said.

She sprang her ace. "Why? Because the lieutenant happens to be your
son-in-law?"

"Certainly not! I just want to see justice done."

"So do I," Mary assured him.

According to the dossier she had seen, the son-in-law specialized in
making the acquaintance of young tourists, seducing them, suggesting
places where they could trade in the black market or buy drugs, and then
turning them in.

Mary said in a conciliatory tone, "I see no need for your daughter to
know how her husband conducts himself. I think it would be much better
if you released Hannah Murphy from jail and I sent her back to the
States. What do you say, Captain?"

He sat there turning. Finally he shrugged. "I will use what little

influence I have."

"I'm sure you will, Captain Istrase. Thank you."

The next day a grateful Hannah Murphy was on her way home.

"How did you do it?" Mike Slade asked unbelievingly.

"I followed your advice. I charmed him."

Chapter Eight

THE day Beth and Tim were to start school, Mary got a call at five a.m. from the embassy that a NIACT-A night action cable-had come in and required an immediate answer. It was the start of a long and busy day, and by the time Mary returned to the residence, it was after seven p.m. The children were waiting for her.

"Well," Mary asked, "how was school?"

"I like it," Beth replied. "Did you know there are kids there from twenty-two different countries? This neat Italian boy kept staring at me all through class. It's a great school."

"They've got a keen science laboratory," Tim added. "Tomorrow we're going to take some Remanian frogs apart."

"well, I'm glad you had no problems."

Beth said, "No, Mom. Mike Slade took care of us."

"What does Mike Slade have to do with your going to school?"

"Didn't he tell you? He took us there and introduced us to our teachers. He knows them all."

"He knows a lot of kids there too," Tim said. "And he introduced us to
them. Everybody likes him. He's a neat guy."

A little too neat, Mary thought.

THE following morning when Mike walked into Mary's office, she said, "I
understand that you took Beth and Tim to school."

He nodded. "It's tough for youngsters, trying to adjust in a foreign
country. They're good kids. And speaking of kids, we have a sick one
here you'd better take a look at "

He led her to a small office down the corrido;. On the couch was a
white-faced young marine, groaning in pain.

"What happened?" Mary asked.

"My guess is appendicitis."

"Then we'd better get him to a hospital right away."

"Not here. He has to be flown either to Rome, Zurich, or Frankfurt. No
one from an American embassy ever goes to a hospital in an iron curtain
country.

"But why?"

"Because we're vulnerable. We could be put under either or given
scopolamine. They could extract all kinds of information from us. It's
a State Department rule. We fly him out."

"Why don't we have our own doctor?" Mary snapped.

"Because we're a C-category embassy. We haven't the

budget for our own doctor. An American doctor pays us a visit here once every three months. In the meantime, we have a pharmacist for minor aches and pains." He picked up a form from the desk. "Just sign this, and he's on his way."

"Very well." Mary signed the paper. She walked over to the young marine and took his hand in hers. "You're going to be fine , she said softly. "Just fine."

Two hours later the marine was on a plane to Frankfurt.

MARY SPENT EVERY possible MOMENT she could with the children. They did a lot of sight-seeing. There were dozens of museums and old churches to visit, but for the children the highlight was the trip to Dracula's castle in Brasoy, located in the heart of Transylvania, a hundred miles from Bucharest.

"The,countThe count was really a prince," Florian explained on the drive

up. nnce Vlad Tepes. He was the great hero who stopped the Turkish invasion."

"I thought he just sucked blood and killed people," Tim said.

Florian nodded. "Yes. Unfortunately, after the war Vlad's power went to his head. He became a dictator, and he impaled his enemies on stakes. The legend grew that he was a vampire. An Irishman named Bram Stoker wrote a book based on the legend. A silly book, but

it has done
wonders for tourism."

Bran Castle was a huge stone monument high in the mountains. They climbed the steep stone steps leading to the castle and went into a low-ceilinged room containing guns and ancient artifacts.

"This is where Count Dracula murdered his victims and drank their blood," the guide said in a sepulchral voice.

The room was damp and eerie. A spiderweb brushed across Tim's face.
"I'm not scared or anything," he said to his mother, "but can we get out of here?"

EVERY morning when Mary rode to work, she noticed long lines of people outside the gates waiting to get into the consular section of the embassy. She had taken it for granted that they were people with minor problems they hoped the consul could solve. But one morning she went to the window to take a closer look, and the expressions she saw on their faces compelled her to go into Mike's office.

"Who are all those people waiting in line outside?"

Mike walked with her to his window. "They're mostly Romanian Jews. They're waiting to file applications for visas."

"But there's an Israeli embassy in Bucharest."

"They think there's less of a chance of the Remanian security people finding out their intention if they come to us. They're wrong, of course." He pointed out the window. "That apartment house

has several
flats filled with agents using telescopic lenses,

photographing everybody who goes in -and out of the embassy."

"That's terrible!"

"That's the way they play the game. When a Jewish family applies for a
visa to emigrate, they lose their green job cards and they're thrown out
of their apartments. Then it takes three to four years before the
government will tell them whether they'll even get their exit papers,
and the answer is usually no."

"Can't we do something about it?"

"We try all the time. But Ionescu enjoys playing a cat-andmouse game
with the Jews. Very few of them are ever allowed to leave the country."

Mary looked out at the expressions of hopelessness on their faces.
"There has to be a way," she said.

"Don't break your heart," Mike told her, handing her a mug of coffee.

What a cold man, Mary thought. I wonder if anything ever touches him.
I'm going to do something to help the Jews, she promised herself.

Mike sat down at his desk. "There's a Remanian folk dance company
opening tonight. They're supposed to be pretty good. Would you like to
go?"

Mary was taken by surprise. The last thing she had

expected was for
Mike to invite her out.

And now, even more incredibly, she found herself saying yes.

"Good." Mike handed her a small envelope. "Here are three tickets. You
can take Beth and Tim, courtesy of the Romaniari government. We get
tickets to most of their openings."

Mary stood there, her face flushed, feeling like a fool. "Thank you,"
she said stiffly.

"I'll have Florian pick ypu up at eight o'clock."

BETH and Tim were not interested in going to the theater. Beth had
invited a schoolmate for dinner. "It's my Italian friend," she said.

"To tell you the truth, I've never really cared much for folk dancing,"
Tim added.

Mary laughed. "I'll let you two off the hook this time."

She wondered if the children were as lonely as she was. She thought
about whom she could invite to go with her, mentally running down the
list: Colonel McKinney, jerry Davis, Harriet Kruger. There was no one
she really wanted to be with. I'll go alone, she decided.

The folk theater, anornate relic of more tranquil times, was on Rasodia
Roman, a bustling street filled with small stands selling flowers,
plastic slippers, blouses, and pens. The entertainment was boring, the
costumes tawdry, and the dancers awkward. The show seemed

interminable,
and when it was finally over, Mary was glad to escape into the fresh
night air. Florian was standing by the limousine, in front of the
theater.

"I'm afraid there will be a delay, Madam Ambassador. A flat tire. And
a thief has stolen the spare. I have sent for one. It should be here
in the next hour. Would you like to wait in the car?"

Mary looked up at the full moon. The evening was crisp and clear. She
realized she had not taken a walk in the month since she had arrived in
Bucharest. "I think I'll walk back."

She turned and started down the street toward the central square.
Bucharest was a fascinating, exotic city. Even at this late hour most
of the shops were open, and there were queues at all of them. Coffee
shops were serving gogoage, the delicious Romanian doughnuts. The
sidewalks were crowded with late-night shoppers carrying pungi, the
string shopping bags. It seemed to Mary that the people were ominously
quiet. They were staring at her, the women avidly eyeing her clothes.
She began to walk faster. When she reached a street called Calea
Victorier, she stopped, unsure of which direction to take. She said to
a passerby, "Excuse me-" He gave her a quick, frightened look and
hurried off.

How was she, going to get back? It seemed to her that the residence was
somewhere to the east. She began walking in that

direction. Soon she
was on a small, dimly lit side street. In the fat
distance she could
see a broad, well-lit boulevard. I can get a taxi there,
Mary thought
with relief.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps behind her, and she
turned. A
large man in an overcoat was coming toward her.

"Excuse me," the man called out in a heavy Remanian
accent.

"Are you lost?"

She was filled with relief He was probably a policeman.
"Yes," she said
gratefully. "I want to go back to-"

There was the sudden roar of a car racing up behind her
and then the
squeal of brakes. The pedestrian in the overcoat grabbed
Mary. She
could smell his hot, fetid breath and feel his fat fingers
bruising her
wrist. He started pushing her toward the open door of the
ear. "Get
in!" the man growled.

"No!," Mary was fighting to break free, and screaming,
"Help! Help me!"

There was a shout from across the street, and a figure
came racing
toward them. The man who had accosted her stopped, unsure
of what to
do.

The stranger yelled, "Let go of her!" He grabbed the man
in the overcoat
and pulled him away from Mary. She found herself suddenly
free.

The man behind the wheel got out of the car to help his accomplice, but then from the far distance came the sound of an approaching siren, and the two men leaped into the car and it sped away.

A blue-and-white car with the word militia on the side and a flashing light on top pulled up in front of Mary. Two men in uniform hurried out. In Remanian one of them asked, "Are you all right?" And then in halting English, "What happened?"

Mary was fighting to get herself under control. "Two men. They-they tr-tried to force me into their car. If-if it hadn't been for this gentleman-" She turned around. But the stranger was gone.

MARY fought all night long, struggling to escape the men, waking in a panic, falling back to sleep and waking again. She kept reliving the scene. Had they known who she was? Or were they merely trying to rob a tourist?

When Mary arrived at her office, Mike Slade was waiting for her as usual. He brought in two cups of coffee and sat down across from, her. The coffee was delicious, and she realized that having .coffee with Mike had become a morning ritual.

"How was the theater?" he asked.

"Fine." The rest was none of his business.

"Did you get hurt when they tried to kidnap you?"

"I- How do you know about that?"

His voice was filled with irony. "Madam Ambassador, Remania is one big open secret. It wasn't very clever of you to go for a stroll by yourself."

"I'm aware of that now. It won't happen again."

"Good." His tone was brisk.,"Did they take anything?"

"No."

He frowned. "It makes no sense. If they had wanted your coat or purse, they could have taken them -from you on the street. Trying. to force you into a car means it was a kidnapping."

"Who would want to kidnap me?"

"It wouldn't have been Ionescu's men. He's trying to keep our relations on an even keel. It would have to be some dissident group." He took a sip of his coffee. "May I give you some advice?"

"I'm listening."

"Go home."

"What?"

Mike Slade put down the cup. "Send in a letter of resignation, pack up your kids, and go back to Kansas', where you'll be safe."

Mary could feel her face getting red. "Mr. Slade, I made a mistake. It's not the first one I've made, and it probably won't be the last one. But I was appointed to this post by the President of the United States, and until he fires me, I don't want you or anyone else telling me to go

home." She fought to keep control of her voice. "I expect the people in this embassy to work with me, not against me. If That's too much for you to handle, why don't you go home?"

Mike Slade stood up. "I'll see that the morning reports are put on your desk, Madam Ambassador."

The attempted kidnapping was the sole topic of conversation at the embassy that morning. How had everyone found out? Mary wondered. And how had Mike Slade found out? Mary wished she could have learned the name of her rescuer so that she could thank him. In the quick glimpse she had had of him, she had gotten the impression of an attractive man, probably in his early forties. He had had a foreign accent.

An idea started to gnaw at Mary, and it was hard to dismiss. The only person she knew of who wanted to get rid of her was Mike Slade. What if he had set up the attack to frighten her into leaving? He had given her the theater tickets. He had known where she would be.

THERE was a cocktail party at the French embassy that evening in honor of a visiting French concert pianist. Mary was tired and nervous, but she knew she had to go.

When she arrived, the embassy was already crowded with guests. As she was exchanging pleasantries with the ambassador .She caught sight of the stranger who had rescued her from the kidnappers. He was standing in a corner talking to the Italian ambassador and his aide.

"Please excuse me," Mary said, and moved Across the room toward her
rescuer.

He was saying, "Of course I miss Paris, but I hope-" He broke off as he
saw Mary approaching. "Ah, the lady in distress."

"You know each other?" the Italian ambassador asked. "We haven't been
officially introduced," Mary replied. "Madam Ambassador, may I present
Dr. Louis Desforges."

The expression on the Frenchman's face changed. "Madam Ambassador? I
beg your pardon! I had no idea." His voice was filled with
embarrassment. "I should have recognized you."

"You did better than that." Mary smiled. "You saved me."

The Italian ambassador looked at the doctor and said, "Ahl So you were
the one." He turned to Mary. "I, heard about your unfortunate
experience."

"It would have been unfortunate if Dr. Desforges hadn't come along.
Thank you."

Louis Desforges smiled. "I'm happy that I was in the right place at the
right time."

The ambassador saw an English contingent enter and said, "If you will
excuse us, there is someone we have to see."

He and his aide hurried off. Mary was alone with the doctor.

"Why did you run away when the police came?" she asked.

He studied her a moment. "It is not good policy to get involved with
the]Remanian police. They have a way of arresting witnesses, then
pumping them for information. I'm a doctor attached to the French
embassy here, and I don't have diplomatic enununity. I do, however,
know a great deal about what goes on at our embassy."

He smiled. "So forgive me if I seemed to desert you."

There was a directness about him that was very appealing. In some way
that Mary could not define, he reminded her of Edward. Perhaps because
Louis Desforges was a doctor. But no, it was more than that. He had
the same openness that Edward had had, almost the same smile.

"If you'll excuse me," Dr. Desforges said, "I must go and become a
social animal."

"You don't like parties?"

He winced. "I despise them."

"Does your wife enjoy them?"

"Yes, she did. Very much." He hesitated, then said, "She and our two
children are dead."

Mary paled. "Oh, I'm so sorry. How His face was rigid. "I blame
myself. We were living in Algeria. I was in the underground, fighting
the terrorists." His words became slow and halting. "They found out my
identity and blew away the house. I was away at the time."

"I'm so sorry," Mary said again. Hopeless, inadequate words.

"There is a cliche that time heals everything. I no longer believe it."
His voice was bitter. He looked at her and said, "If you will excuse
me, Madam Ambassador." He turned and walked over to greet a group of
arriving guests.

He does remind me a little of Edward, Mary thought again. He's a brave
man. He's in a lot of pain, . and I think That's what draws me to him.
I'm in pain too. Will I ever get over missing you, Edward? It's so
lonely here.

THE following day Mary could not get Dr. Louis Desforges out of her
mind. He had saved her life and then disappeared. She was glad she had
found him again. On an impulse she bought a beautiful silver bowl for
him and had it sent to the French embassy. It was a small enough gesture
after what he had done.

That afternoon Dr. Desforges telephoned. "Good afternoon, Madam
Ambassador." The phrase sounded delightful in his French accent. "I
called to thank you for your thoughtful gift. I assure you that it was
unnecessary. I was delighted that I was able to be of some service."

"It was more than just some service," Mary told him.

There was a pause. "Would you-" He stopped.

"Yes?" Mary prompted.

"Nothing, really." He sounded suddenly shy. "I was wondering if you might care to have dinner with me one evening, but I know how busy you must be and-"

"would love to," Mary said quickly.

"Really? Are you free tomorrow night?"

"I have a party at six, but we could go after that."

"Ah, splendid."

They agreed to meet at the Taru Restaurant at eight o'clock.

IN THE limousine on the way to the restaurant the next evening Mary asked Florian to stop at the embassy. She had left a silk scarf in her office and wanted to pick it up.

Gunny was on duty at the desk. He stood at attention and saluted her. Mary went up the stairs to her office and turned on the light. She stood there, frozen. On the wall someone had sprayed in red paint GO HOME BEFORE YOU DIE. She backed out of the room, white-faced, and ran down to the lobby. "Gunny. Wh-who's been in my office?" she demanded.

"Why, no one that I know of, ma'am."

"Let me see your roster sheet." She tried to keep her voice from quavering.

"Yes, ma'am." Gunny pulled out the visitors' access sheet and handed it to her. Each name had the time of entry listed after it.

She started at
five thirty, the time she had left the office, and scanned the list.
There were a dozen names.

Mary looked up at the marine guard. "Were all the people on this list
escorted to the offices they visited?"

"Always, Madam Ambassador. No one goes up to the second floor without
an escort. Is something wrong?"

Something was very wrong.

Mary said, "Please send someone to my office to paint out that obscenity
on the wall."

She turned and hurried outside, afraid she was going to be sick.

DR. Louis DESFORGES was waiting for Mary when she arrived .at the
restaurant. He stood up as she approached the table.

"I'm sorry I'm late." Mary tried to sound normal. She wished she had
not come. She pressed her hands together to keep them from trembling.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm fine." Go home before you die. "I think I'd like
a straight Scotch, please."

The doctor ordered drinks, then said, "It can't be easy being an
ambassador in this country-especially for a woman. Remanians are male
chauvinists, you know."

Mary forced a smile. "Tell me about yourself " Anything

to take her
mind off the threat.

"I am afraid there is not much to tell that is exciting."

"You mentioned that you fought in the underground in Algeria. That
sounds exciting."

He shrugged. "We live in terrible times. I believe that every man must
risk something so that in the end he does not have to risk everything.
The terrorist situation is literally that-terrifying. We must put an end
to it." His voice was filled with passion.

He's like Edward, Mary thought. Edward was always passionate about his
beliefs.

"If I had known that the price would be the lives of my family-" He
stopped. His knuckles were white against the table. "Forgive me. I
did not bring you here to talk about my troubles. Let me recommend the
lamb. They do it very well here."

He ordered dinner and a bottle of wine, and they talked. Mary began to
relax, to forget the frightening warning painted in red. She was finding
it surprisingly easy to talk to this attractive Frenchman. In an odd
way it was like talking to Edward. It was amazing how she and Louis
shared so many of the same beliefs and felt the same way about so many
things. Louis Desforges was born in a small town in France, and Mary
was born in a small town in Kansas, thousands of miles apart, and yet
their backgrounds were similar. His father had been a

farmer and had
scrimped and saved to send Louis to a medical school in Paris.

"My father was a wonderful man, Madam Ambassador."

"Mary."

"Thank you, Mary."

She smiled. "You're welcome, Louis."

Mary wondered what his personal life was like. He was handsome and
intelligent. "Have you thought of getting married again?" She could not
believe she had asked him that.

He shook his head. "No. My wife was a remarkable woman. No one could
ever replace her."

That's how I feel about Edward, Mary thought. And yet it was not really
a question of replacing a beloved one. It was finding someone new to
share things with.

Louis was saying, "So when I was offered the opportunity, I thought it
would be interesting to visit Remania." He lowered his voice. "I
confess I feel an evilness about this country. Not the people. They
are lovely. But the government is everything I despise. There is no
freedom here for anyone." He glanced around to make sure no one could
overhear. "I shall be glad when my tour of duty is over and I can
return to France."

Without thinking, Mary heard herself saying, "There are some people who

think I should go home."

"I beg your pardon?"

And suddenly Mary found herself telling him about the paint scrawl on her office wall.

"But that is horrible! You have no idea who did this?"

"No."

Louis said, "May I make an impertinent confession? Since I found out who you were, I have been asking questions. Everyone who knows you is very impressed with you."

She was listening to him with intense interest.

"You have brought here an image of America that is beautiful and intelligent and warm. If you believe in what you are doing, then you must fight for it. You must stay. Do not let anyone frighten you away." It was just what Edward would have said.

THE following morning Mike Slade brought in two cups of coffee. He nodded at the wall where the message had been painted. "I hear someone has been spraying graffiti on your walls."

"Yes. Have they found out who did it?"

Mike took a sip of coffee. "No. I went through the visitors' list myself Everyone is accounted for."

"That means it must have been someone here in the embassy."

"Either that, or someone managed to sneak in past the

guards."

"Do you believe that?"

Mike put down his coffee cup. "Nope."

"Neither do I."

"What exactly did it say?"

"'Go home before you die."' He made no comment.

"Who would want to kill me?"

"I don't know. But we're doing everything we can to track down whoever it is. In the meantime, I've arranged for a marine guard to be posted outside your door at night."

"Mr. Slade, I would appreciate a straight answer. Do you think I'm in any real danger?"

He studied her thoughtfully. "Madam Ambassador, they, assassinated Abrahwn Lincoln, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Marin Groza. We're all vulnerable. The answer to your question is yes."

THREE days later Mary had dinner again with Dr. Louis Desforges. He seemed more relaxed with her this time, and although the core of sadness she sensed within him was still there, he took pains to be attentive and amusing. Mary wondered if he felt the same attraction toward her that she felt toward him.

After dinner when Louis took Mary back to the residence, she asked, "Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you," he said. "I would."

The children were downstairs doing their homework, and Mary introduced them to Louis.

He bent down before Beth and said, "May I?" And he put his arms around her and hugged her. He straightened up. "One of my little girls was three years younger than you. The other one was about your age. I'd like to think they would have grown up to be as pretty as you are, Beth."

Beth smiled. "Thank you. Where are-"

"would you all like some hot chocolate?" Mary asked hastily.

The four of them sat in the huge kitchen drinking the hot chocolate and talking.

The children were utterly enchanted with Louis. He focused entirely on them, telling them stories and anecdotes and jokes until he had them roaring with laughter.

It was almost midnight when Mary looked at her watch. "Oh, no! You children should have been in bed hours ago. Scoot."

Tim went over to Louis. "Will you come see us again?"

"I hope so, Tim."

Mary saw Louis to the door. He took her hand in his. "They're beautiful children." His voice was husky. "I won't try to tell you what

this evening has meant to me, Mary."

"I'm glad." She was looking into his eyes, and she felt him moving
toward her. She raised her lips.

"Good night, Mary." And he was gone.

DAvm Victor, the commerce consul, hurried into Mary's office. "I have
some very bad news. I just got a tip that President Ionescu is going to
approve a contract with Argentina for a million and a half tons of corn,
and with Brazil for half a million tons of soybeans. We were counting
heavily on their buying from us."

"How far have the negotiations gone?"

"They're almost concluded. We've been shut out. I was about to send a
cable to Washington-with your approval, of course."

"Hold off a bit," Mary said. "I want to think about it."

"You won't get President Ioneseu to change his mind. Believe me, I've
tried every argument I could think of."

"Then we have nothing to lose if I give it a try." She buzzed her
secretary. "Dorothy, get me the presidential palace."

ALExomRos Ionescu invited Mary to the palace for lunch. As she entered
she was greeted at the door by Nicu, his fourteenyear-old son. He was a
handsome boy, tall for his age, with beautiful black eyes and a flawless
complexion.

"Good afternoon, Madsen Ambassador," he said. "I am Nicu. Welcome to

the palace. I have heard very nice things about you."

"Thank you. I'm pleased to hear that, Nicu."

"I will tell my father you have arrived."

MARY AND IONESCU SAT ACROss from each other in the formal dining room,
just the two of them. The President had been drinking and was in a
mellow mood. He lit a Snogoy, the vile-smelling Remanian cigarette.

"Mr; President," said Mary, "I was eager to meet with you, because there
is something important I would like to discuss with you."

Ionescu almost laughed aloud. He knew exactly why she had come. The
Americans wished to sell him corn and soybeans, but they were too late.
The American ambassador would go away empty-handed this time. Too bad.
Such an attractivewoman.

"Yes?" he said innocently.

"I want to talk to you about sister cities."

lonescu blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sister cities. You know, like San Francisco and Osaka, Los Angeles and
Bombay, Washington and Bangkok. . . ."

"-don't understand. What does that have to do with-"

"Mr. President, it occurred to me that you could get headlines all over
the world if you made Bucharest a sister city of some American city. It
would get almost as much attention as President Ellison's people-to-people plan."

He said cautiously, "A sister city with a city in the United States? It is an interesting idea. What would it involve?"

"Mostly, wonderful publicity for you. You would be a hero. It would be your idea. You would pay the city a visit. A delegation from Kansas City would pay you a visit."

Kansas City?"

"That's just a suggestion, of course. Kansas City is Middle America. There are farmers there, like your farmers. Mr. President, your name will be on everyone's lips. No one in Europe has thought of doing this."

He sat there, silent. "I- I would naturally have to give this a great deal of thought."

"Naturally."

"Kansas City, Kansas, and Bucharest, Remania." He nodded. "We are a much larger city, of course."

"Of course. Bucharest would be the big sister."

"I must admit it is a very intriguing idea." Your name will be on everyone's lips. "Is there any chance of a rejection from the American side?" Ioneseu asked.

"Absolutely none. I can guarantee it."

He sat there reflecting. "When would this go into effect?"

"Just as soon as you're ready to announce it. I'll handle

our end."

Ionescu thought. of something else. "We could set up a trade exchange
with our sister city. Remania has many things to sell. Tell me, what
crops does Kansas grow?"

"Among other things," Mary said quietly, "corn and soybeans."

"You really made the deal? You actually fooled him?" David Victor asked
incredulously.

"Not for a minute," Mary assured him. "loneseu knew what I was after.
He just liked the package I wrapped it in. You can go in and close the
deal. He's already rehearsing his television speech."

WHEN Stanton Rogers heard the news, he telephoned Mary. "You're a
genius." He laughed. "We thought we'd lost that deal. How in the world
did you do it?"

"Ego," Mary said. "His."

"The President asked me to tell you what a really great job you're doing
over there, Mary."

"Thank him for me, Stan."

"I will. By the way, the President and I are leaving for China in a few
weeks. If you need me, you can get in touch with me.

through my office."

"Have a wonderful trip."

Chapter Nine

OVER the swiffly moving weeks the dancing March winds had given way to
spring and then summer. Trees and flowers blossomed everywhere in
Bucharest, and the parks were green.

In Buenos Aires, it was winter. When Neusa Muez returned to her
apartment, it was the middle of the night. The telephone was ringing.
"S(?"

It was the gringo from the United States.

"May I speak with Angel?"

"Angel no here, senor. Wha' you wan'?"

"Tell Angel I need him for a contract in Bucharest."

"Budapes'?"

The Controller found his irritation mounting. "Bucharest. Romania.
Tell him It's a five-million-dollar contract. He has to be in Bucharest
by the end of June. That's three weeks from now. Do you have that?"

"Wait a minute. I'm writin'. Okay. How many people Angel gotta kill
for five million dollars?"

"A lot. . . ."

THE daily long lines in front of the embassy continued to disturb Mary.
She discussed it again with Mike Slade.

"There must be something we can do to help those people get out of the
country."

"Everything's been tried," Mike assured her. "We've applied pressure,
we've offered to sweeten the money pot.... Ionescu refuses to cut a
deal."

"I'm going to have another talk with him."

"Good luck."

Mary asked Dorothy Stone to set up an appointment with the dictator. A
few minutes later the secretary walked into Mary's office. "I'm sorry,
Madun Ambassador. Something weird is going on at the presidential
palace. Ionescu isn't seeing anybody. In fact, no one can even get
in."

"Dorothy," Mary said, "see if you can find out What's going on there."

An hour later Dorothy reported back. "They're keeping it very
hush-hush. Ionescu's son is dying."

Mary was aghast. "Nicu? What happened?"

"He has botulism poisoning. There was an epidemic in East Germany a few
months ago. Apparently Nicu visited there and someone gave him some
canned food as a gift. He ate some of it yesterday."

"But there's an antiserum for botulism!" Mary exclaimed.

"The European countries are out of it The epidemic used it up."

"Oh, my God."

When Dorothy left the office, Mary sat there thinking, It, might be too

late, but still ... She remembered how cheerful and happy young Nicu
was. He was fourteen years old-only two years older than Beth. She
pressed the intercom button. "Dorothy, get me Walter Reed hospital in
Maryland."

Five minutes later she was speaking to the director.

"Yes, Madam Ambassador. We do have an antiserum for botulism poisoning,
and I'll be happy to supply some. But botulism poisoning works very
rapidly. I'm afraid that by the time it gets there . . ."

"I'll arrange for it to get here. just have it ready. Thank you."

Ten minutes later Mary was speaking to air force general Ralph Zukor, in
Washington.

"Good morning, Madam Ambassador. Well, this is an unexpected pleasure.
My wife and I are big fans of yours. How are-"

"General, I need a favor. I need your fastest jet."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I need a jet to fly some serum to Bucharest right away. Can you do
it?"

"Well, yes. But first you'll have to get approval from the Secretary of
Defense. There are requisition forms to fill out."

Mary listened, seething. "General, a boy's life is at stake. He
happens to be the son of the President of Remania. If that boy dies

because some form hasn't been filled out, I'm going to call the biggest
press conference you've ever seen. And I'll let you explain why you let
Ionescu's son die."

"I'm sorry, but I can't possibly authorize an operation like this
without an approval from the White House. If-"

Mary snapped, "Then, get it. The serum will be delivered to Andrews Air
Force Base. And General ... every single minute counts."

She hung up and sat there, silently praying.

General Zukor's aide said, "What was that all about, sir?"

"The ambassador expects me to send up an SR-71 to fly some serum to
Remania. It's ridiculous. But we might as well cover ourselves, Get me
Stanton Rogers."

Five minutes later the general was speaking to the President's foreign
affairs adviser. "I just wanted to go on record with you that the
request was made, and I naturally refused. If-"

Stanton Rogers said, "General, how soon can you have an SR-71 airborne?"

"In ten minutes, but-"

"Do it."

Nicu lonescu's nervous system had been affected. He lay in bed,
disoriented, sweating and pale, attached to a respirator. There were
three doctors at his bedside.

President lonescu strode into the room. "What's

happening?"

" Your Excellency, we have communicated with our colleagues all over
Eastern and Western Europe. There is no antiseam left."

"What about the United States?"

The doctor shrugged. "By the time we could arrange for someone to fly
the serum here. .." He paused delicately. "I'm afraid it would be too
late."

Ionescu picked up his son's hand. "You're not going to die," he said,
weeping. "You're not going to die."

AN A= helicopter delivered the antibotulism semm, packed in ice, to
Andrews Air Force Base. Three minutes later the SR-7]L was in the air,
on a northeast heading.

The SR-71-the U.S. Air Force's fastest supersonic jet-flies at three
times the speed of sound. It slowed down once to refuel over the mid
Atlantic. The plane- made the five-thousand-mile flight to Bucharest in
a little over two and a half hours.

Colonel McKinney was waiting at the airport for the serum. An army
escort cleared the way to the presidential palace.

MARY had remained in her office all night, getting up-to-the minute
reports. At six a.m. McKinney telephoned. "They gave the boy the
serum. The doctors say he's going to live."

"Oh, thank God!"

Two days later a diamond-and-emerald necklace was delivered to Mary's
office with a note: "I can never thank you enough. Alexandros Ionescu."

"I don't believe this!" Dorothy exclaimed when she saw the necklace. "It
must have cost half a million dollars!"

"At least," Mary said. "Return it."

The following morning President Ionescu sent for Mary.

When she arrived, an aide said, "The President is waiting for you in his
office."

"May I see Nicu first?"

"Yes, of course." He led her upstairs.

Nicu was in bed reading. He looked up as Mary entered. "Good morning,
Madam Ambassador."

"Good morning, Nicu."

"MY father told me what you did. I wish to thank you."

"I couldn't let you die. I'm saving you for Beth one day."

Nicu laughed. "Bring her over, and we'll talk about it."

President Ionescu was waiting downstairs for Mary. He said without
preamble, "You returned my gift."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

He indicated a chair. "Sit down." He studied her. "You saved my son's
life. I must give you something." " Mary said, "I don't make trades for

children's lives.

"You must want something! Name your price."

Mary said, "Your Excellency, there is no price. I have two children of
my own. I know how you must feel."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Do you? Nicu is my only son. If
anything had happened to him-" He stopped, unable to go on.

"I went up to see him. He looks fine. If there's nothing else, Your
Excellency, I have an appointment." She rose and started to leave.

"Waitl You will not accept a GIFT but-"

"No. I've explained-', IonesCu held up a hand. "All right, all right."
He thought for a moment. "If you were to make a wish, what would you
wish for?

Anything you want."

Mary stood there studying his face. Finally she said, "I wish that the
restriction on the Jews waiting to leave Remania could be lifted."

"I see." lonescu was still for a long time before he looked up at Mary.
"It shall be done. They will not all be allowed out, of course, but I
will make it easier."

When the announcement was made public two days later, Mary received a
telephone call from President Ellison himself "I thought I was sending a
diplomat, and I got a miracle worker.

Congratulations, Mary, on everything you've done over there."

"Thank you, Mr. President." She hung up, feeling a warm glow.

IN CELEBRATION of her diplomatic coup Louis invited Mary to a candlelit dinner in the rooftop restaurant at the Hotel Intercontinental. They saw each other whenever possible now, and more and more Mary had come to rely on him as an island of strength and,sanity. Before they parted that night, Mary found herself accepting an invitation to go away to the mountains with Louis the following weekend.

Once she got into bed, she lay in the dark talking to Edward: Darling, I'll always, always love you, but it's time I started a new life. You'll always be a part of that life, but there has to be someone else too. Louis isn't you, but he's Louis. He's strong, and he's good, and he's brave. That's as close as I can come to having you. Please understand, Edward. Please....

"JULy is just around the corner," Harriet Kruger told Mary. "In the past the wnbassador always gave a Fourth of July party for the Americans living in Bucharest. If you'd prefer not to-"

"No. I think it's a lovely idea."

"Fine. I'll take care of all the arrangements. A lot of flags, balloons, an orchestra-the works."

"Sounds wonderful. Thank you, Harriet."

A big party would eat into the residence's expense account, but it would
be worth it. The truth is, Mary thought, I miss home. She had been
here for only four months, but it seemed an eternity.

junction City had meant peace and security, an easy, friendly way of
life. Here, there was fear and terror and a death threat scrawled on
her office wall in red paint. Suddenly Mary felt a sharp pang of
loneliness, a sense of being totally isolated from her roots, adrift in
an alien and dangerous land. Then she thought about Louis, and the
loneliness began to disappear.

MARY WAS HAVING HER USUAL morning coffee with Mike Slade, discussing the
day's agenda.

When they finished, he said, "I've been hearing mmors about you. It
seems that you're seeing a lot of Dr. Desforges."

Mary felt a flare of anger. "Who I see is no one's business."

"I beg to differ with you, Madam Ambassador. The State Department has a
strict rule against getting involved with foreigners, and the doctor is
a foreigner. He also happens to be an enemy agent."

Mary was almost too stunned to speak. "That's absurd!"

"Think about how you met him," Mike suggested. "The damsel in distress
and the knight in shining armor. That's the oldest trick in the world.
I've used it myself."

"I don't care what you've done," Mary retorted. "He's worth a dozen of you. He fought against terrorists in Algeria, and they murdered his wife and children."

Mike said mildly, "That's interesting. I've been examining his dossier. Your doctor never had a wife or children."

THEY stopped for lunch at TimiSSoara, on their way up to the Carpathian Mountains. The inn was decorated in the period atmosphere of a medieval wine cellar.

"The specially of the house is gone," Louis told Mary. "I would suggest the venison."

"Fine." she had never eaten venison. It was delicious. There was an air of confidence about Louis, a quiet strength that gave Mary a feeling of security.

After lunch they started out again. They passed farmers driving primitive homemade wagons, and caravans of Gypsies.

Louis was a skillful driver. Mary studied him as he drove. He's an enemy agent. She did not believe Mike Slade. Every instinct told her he was lying. She trusted Louis. No one could have faked the emotion I saw on his face when he was playing with the children, she thought.

The air was getting noticeably thinner and cooler. The mountains ahead looked like pictures she had seen of the Swiss Alps, their peaks covered by mists and icy clouds the color of steel.

It was late afternoon when they reached their destination, Sio plea, a lovely mountain resort built like a miniature chalet. Their suite had a comfortable living room, simply furnished, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a terrace with a breathtaking view of the mountains.

"For the first time in my life"-Louis sighed-"I wish I were a painter."

"It is a beautiful view.

He moved closer to her. "No. I wish I could paint you."

He took her in his arms and held her tightly. She buried her head against his chest, and then Louis's lips were on hers, and she forgot everything except what was happening to her. He led her to the bed.
There was a frantic need in her for someone to reassure her, to protect her, to let her know that she was no longer alone. She needed to be one with him....

After a long, long time they lay contented. She nestled in his strong arms, and they talked.

"It's so strange," Louis said. "I feel whole again. Since Renee and the children were killed, I've been a ghost, wandering around lost."

"I've felt helpless too. Edward was my umbrella, and when it died and he wasn't there to protect me, I nearly drowned."

It was almost perfect. Almost. Because there was a question Mary dared not ask: Did you have a wife and children? The moment she

asked that
question, she knew everything between them would be over forever. Louis
would never forgive her for doubting him. Curse Mike Slade, she
thought.

Louis was watching her. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing, darling."

Saturday they went on a tram to a mountain peak. In the eyening they
drove to Eintrul, a rustic restaurant in the. mountains, where they had
dinner in a large room that had an open fireplace mlith a roaring fire.
There were hunting trophies on the wall, and through the windows they
could look at the snow-covered hills outside. A perfect setting, with
the perfect companion.

And finally, too soon, it was time to leave.

As they neared the outskirts of Bucharest they drove by fields of
sunflowers, their faces moving toward the sun. That's me, Mary thought
happily. I'm finally moving into the sunlight.

THE next MORNING WHEN MARY arrived at her office, there were a dozen red
roses with a note: "Thank you for you."

Mary read the card. And wondered if Louis had sent flowers to RencSSe.
And wondered if there had been a Rent-e and two daughters. And hated
herself for it. Why would Mike Slade make up terrible lie like that?
There was no way she could ever check it.

And at that moment Eddie Maltz, the political consul and

CIA agent,
walked into her office.

They spent some time discussing a colonel who had approached Maltz about defecting.

"He'd be a valuable asset for us," Maltz told her. "He'll be bringing some useful information with him, but be prepared to receive some heat from lonescu."

"Thank you, Mr. Maltz."

He rose to leave.

On a sudden impulse Mary said ' "Wait. I wonder if I could ask you for a favor? It's personal and confidential."

"Sounds like our motto." Maltz smiled.

"I need some information on a Dr. Louis Desforges. He's attached to the French embassy." This was more difficult than she had imagined. It was a betrayal. "I'd like to know whether Dr. Desforges was once married and had two children. Do you think you could find out?"

"Will twenty-four hours be soon enough?" Maltz asked.

"Yes, thank you." Please forgive me, Louis.

A short time later Mike Slade walked into Mary's office and put a cup of coffee on her desk. Something in his attitude seemed subtly changed. Mary was not sure what it was, but she had a feeling that Mike Slade knew all about her weekend. She wondered whether he had spies following

her.

She took a sip of the coffee. Excellent, as usual. That's one thing Mike Slade does well, Mary thought.

"We have some problems," he said. And for the rest of the morning they became involved in a discussion that included the Remanian financial crisis and a dozen other topics.

At the end of the meeting Mary was more tired than usual.

Mike Slade said, "The ballet is opening tonight. Corina Socoli is dancing." She was one of the leading ballerinas in the world.

Mary had met her once at a party at the presidential palace. "I have some tickets if you're interested."

"No, thanks." She thought of the last time Mike had given her tickets. Besides, she was dining at the Chinese embassy.

. As MARY was dressing for dinner that evening she felt suddenly exhausted. She sank down on the bed. I wish I didn't have to go out tonight, she thought wearily. But I have to. My country is depending on me.

The evening was a blur of the same familiar diplomatic corps faces. Mary had only a hazy recollection of the others at her table.

She could not wait to get home.

When she awoke the following morning, she was feeling worse.

Her head ached, and she was nauseated. It took all of her willpower to
get dressed and go to the embassy.

Mike Slade was waiting in her office, coffee in hand. He took one look
at her and said, "You don't look too well. You okay?"

"I'm just tired."

"What you need is some coffee. It will perk you up. No pun intended."
He handed her a cup. "Maybe you should fly to Frankfurt and see our
doctor there."

Mary shook her head. "I'm all right." Her voice was slurred.

The only thing that made her feel slightly better was a visit from Eddie
Maltz.

"I have the information you requested," he said. "Desforges was married
for fourteen years. Wife's name, Ren6e. Two daughters, Phillips and
Genevieve. They were murdered in Algeria by terrorists, as an act of
vengeance against the doctor, who was fighting in the underground. Do
you need any further information?"

"No," Mary said. "That's fine. Thank you."

By midafternoon Mary was feeling hot and feverish, and she called Louis
to cancel dinner. She felt too ill to see anybody. She wished that the
American doctor were in Bucharest. Perhaps Louis would know what was
wrong with her. If I don't get over this, she told herself, I'll call
him back.

Dorothy had the nurse send up some aspirin from the pharmacy.

It did not help.

Somehow Mary managed to struggle through the rest of the

evening and when she finally arrived home, she fell straight into bed.

Her whole body ached, and she could feel that her temperature had climbed. I'm Yeally ill, she thought. I feel as though I'm dying. With an enormous effort she reached out and pulled the bell cord. Carmen, her maid, appeared.

She looked at Mary in alarm. "Madam Ambassadorl What-" Mary's voice was a croak. "Please call the French embassy. I need Dr. Desforges."

MARY opened her eyes and blinked. There were two blurred Louis figures bending over her.

"What's happening to you?" He felt her forehead. It was hot to the touch. "Have you taken your temperature?"

"I don't want to know." It hurt to talk.

Louis sat down on the edge of the bed. "Darling, when did you start feeling this way?"

"The day after we got back from the mountains."

Louis felt her pulse. It was weak and threatly. He smelled her breath.
"Have you eaten something today with garlic?"

She shook her head. "I've hardly eaten all day."

He gently lifted her eyelids. "Have you been thirsty?"

She nodded.

"Pain, muscle cramps, vomiting, nausea?

"Yes. What's the matter with me, Louis?"

"Do you feel like answering some questions?"

She swallowed. "I'll try."

He held her hand. "Do you remember having anything to eat or drink that made you feel ill afterward?"

She shook her head.

"Do you eat breakfast here at the residence with the children?"

"Usually, yes," she whispered.

"And the children are feeling well?"

She nodded.

"What about lunch? Do you eat at the same place every day?"

"No. Sometimes the embassy, sometimes restaurants."

"Is there any one place you regularly have dinner, or anything you regularly eat?"

She closed her eyes.

He shook her gently. "Mary, listen to me." There was an urgency in his voice. "Is there any person you eat with constantly?"

She blinked up at him sleepily. "No." Why was he asking all these
questions? "It's a virus," she mumbled. "Isn't it?"

He took a deep breath. "No. Someone is poisoning you."

It sent a bolt of electricity- through her body. She opened her eyes
wide. "What? I don't believe it."

He was frowning. "I would say it was arsenic poisoning, except that
arsenic is not for sale in Remania."

Mary felt a sudden tremor of fear. "Who-who would be trying to poison
me?"

He squeezed her hand. "Darling, you've got to think. Are you sure
there's no set routine you have where someone gives you something to eat
or drink every day?"

"Of course not," Mary protested weakly. "I told you, I Coffee. Mike
Slade. My own special brew. "Oh, no!"

"What is it?"

She cleared her throat and managed to whisper, "Mike Slade brings me
coffee every morning."

Louis stared at her. "Your deputy chief? But what reason would he have
for trying to kill you?"

"He-he wants to get rid of me."

"We'll talk about this later," Louis said urgently. "The first thing we
have to do is treat you. I'm going to get something for you. I'll be

back in a few minutes."

Mary lay there trying to grasp the meaning of what Louis had told her.
What you need is some coffee. It will make you feel better. I brew it
myself.

She drifted off into unconsciousness and was awakened by Louis's voice.
"Mary!"

She forced her eyes open. Louis was at her bedside, taking a syringe
out of a small bag.

He lifted her arm. "I'm going to give you an injection of BAL.

It's an antidote for arsenic. I'm going to alternate it with
penicillamine. Mary?" She was asleep.

The following morning Louis gave Mar)i another injection, and another
one in the evening. The effects of the drugs were miraculous. The
symptoms began to disappear. The following day Mary felt drained and
weak, as though she had gone through a long illness, but all the pain
and discomfort were gone.

"This is twice you've saved my life."

Louis looked at her soberly. "I think we'd better find out who's trying
to take it."

"How do we do that?"

"I've been checking around at the various embassies. None of them
carries arsenic. I have not beenable to find out about

the American
embassy. So what I want you to do is go to the embassy pharmacy. Tell
them you need a pesticide. Say that you're having trouble with insects
in your garden. Ask for Antrol. That's loaded with arsenic."

Mary looked at him, puzzled. "What's the point?"

"My hunch is that the arsenic had to be flown into Bucharest. If it is
anywhere, it will be in the embassy pharmacy. Anyone who checks out a
poison must sign for it. When you sign for the Antrol, see what names
are on the sheet."

MARY walked down the long corridor to the embassy pharmacy, where the
nurse was working behind the cage. "Good morning, Madam Ambassador. Are
you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Can I get you something?"

Mary took a nervous breath. "My-my gardener tells me he's having
trouble with insects in the garden. I wondered whether you might have
something to help, like Antrol?"

." Why, yes. As a matter of fact, we do." The nurse reached toward a
back shelf and picked up a can with a poison label on it.

"You'll have to sign for it, if you don't mind. It has arsenic in it."

Mary was staring at the form placed in front of her. There was only one
name on it. Mike Slade.

Chapter Ten

WHEN Mary tried to telephone Louis Desforges to tell him what she had learned, his line was busy. He was on the phone with Mike Slade. Dr. Desforges's first instinct had been to report the murder attempt except that he could not believe Slade was re sponsible. And so Louis had decided to telephone Slade himself "I have just left your ambassador," Louis Desforges said. "She is going to live."

"Well, that's good news, DOCtor. Why shouldn't she?"

Louis's tone was cautious. "Someone has been poisoning her."

"What are you talking about?" Mike demanded.

"I think perhaps you know what I'm talking about."

"Hold it! Are you saying that you think I'm responsible? You and I had better have a private talk someplace where we can't be overheard. Can you meet me tonight?"

"At what time?" asked Louis.

"I'm tied up until nine o'clock. Why don't you meet me a few minutes after, at Bineasa Forest. I'll meet you at the fountain and explain everything then."

Louis hesitated. "Very well. I will see you there." He hung up and thought, Mike Slade cannot possibly be behind this.

When Mary tried to telephone Louis again, he had left. No one knew

where to reach him.

MARY and the children were having dinner at the residence.

"You look a lot better," Beth said. "We were worried."

"I feel fine," Mary assured her. And it was the truth. Thank God for Louis l She could hear Mike Slade. Here's your coffee. I brewed it myself. Slowly killing her. She shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Tim asked.

"No, darling." Mary was thinking, I -must not involve the children in my 'nightmares. Besides, there is only one person who can help me. Stanton Rogers. But what proof do I have? That Mike Slade made coffee for me every morning?

Beth was talking to her. "So can we watch a movie tonight?"

Mary had not planned on running a movie, but she had spent so little time with the children lately that she decided to give them a treat.
"Yes."

"Thank you, Madam Ambassador," Tim shouted. "Can we see American Graffiti again?"

American Graffiti. And suddenly Mary knew what proof she might show Stanton Rogers.

At midnight she asked Carmen to call a taxi.

"Don't you want Florian to drive you?" Carmen asked.

"No." This had to be done secretly.

"GooD evening, Madam Ambassador," said the marine guard when Mary emerged from the taxi. "Can I help you?"

"No, thank you. I'm going to my office for a few minutes."

The marine walked her to the entrance and opened the door for her. He watched her walk up the stairs to her office.

Mary turned the lights on and looked at the wall where the red scrawl had been washed away. She walked over to the connecting door that led to Mike Slade's office and entered. The room was in darkness. She turned on the lights.

There were no papers on his desk. The drawers were empty, except for brochures and timetables, innocent things that would be of no use to a snooping cleaning woman. Mary's eyes scrutinized the office. It had to be here somewhere.

She opened the drawers again and started examining their contents slowly and carefully. When she came to a bottom drawer, she felt something hard at the back, behind a mass of papers. She .pulled it out and held it in her hand, staring at it.

It was - a can of red spray paint.

AT A few minutes after nine p.m. Dr. Louis Desforges was waiting in Bineasa Forest, near the fountain. He wondered if he had done the wrong thing by not reporting Mike Slade. No, he thought. First I must hear

what he has to say. If I made a false accusation, it would destroy him.

Mike Slade appeared suddenly out of the darkness. "Thanks for coming.
We can clear this up very quickly. You said you thought someone was
poisoning Mary Ashley."

: ,know it. Someone was feeding her arsenic."

"And you think I'm responsible?"

"You could have put it in her coffee a little bit at a time."

:, Have you reported this to anyone?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first."

I'm glad you did," Mike said. He took his hand out of his pocket. In
it was a -357-caliber Magnum pistol.

Louis stared. "What-what are you doing? Listen to me! You can't-""

Mike Slade pulled the trigger and watched the Frenchman's chest explode
into a red cloud.

MARY was in the bubble room telephoning Stanton Bogers office on the
secure line. It was six p.m. in Washington and one o'clock in the
morning in Bucharest. "This is Ambassador Ashley.

I know that Mr. Rogers is in China with the President, but it's urgent
that I speak to him. Is there any way I can reach him there?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Ambassador. His itinerary is very flexible. I have

no telephone number for him."

Mary felt her heart plummet. "When will you hear from him?"

"It's difficult to say. They have a very busy schedule. Perhaps someone in the State Department could help you."

"No," Mary said dully. "No one else can help me. Thank you very much."

There she sat, surrounded by the most sophisticated electronic equipment in the world, and none of it was of any use to her.

Mike Slade was trying to murder her. She had to let someone know. But whom could she trust? The only one who knew what Mike Slade was trying to do was Louis Desforges.

Mary tried the number at his residence again, but there still was no answer. She remembered what Stanton Rogers had told her: "If you have any messages that you want to send to me without anyone else reading them, the code at the top of the message is three x's."

Mary hurried back to her office and wrote out an urgent message. She placed three x's at the top, took out the black code book from a locked drawer in her desk, and carefully encoded what she had written. At least if anything happened to her now, Stanton Rogers would know who was responsible.

Mary walked down the corridor to the communications room.

Eddie Maltz, the CIA agent, happened to be behind the cage.

"Good evening, Madam Ambassador. You're working late."

"Yes. There's a message I want sent off right away."

"I'll take care of it personally."

"Thank you." She handed it to him and headed for the door.

When Eddie Maltz finished decoding the message, he read it through
twice, frowning. He walked over to the shredder and watched the message
turn into confetti.

Then he placed a call to Floyd Baker, the Secretary of State, in
Washington. Code name: Thor.

IT TOOK Ley Pastemak two months to follow the circuitous trail that led
to Buenos Aires. SIS and half a dozen other security agencies around
the world had helped identify Angel as the killer. Mossad had given him
the name of Neusa Mufiez, Angel's mistress. They all wanted to
eliminate Angel. To Ley Pastemak, Angel had become an obsession.
Because of Pastemak's failure, Marin Groza had died, and Pastemak could
never forgive himself for that. He could, however, make atonement.

He located the building where Neusa Muez lived and kept watch on it,
waiting for Angel to appear. After five days, when there was no sign of
him, Pastemak made his move. He waited until the woman left, and after
fifteen minutes walked upstairs, picked the lock on her door, and
entered the apartment. He searched it swiffly and thoroughly. There

were no photographs, memos, or addresses that could lead him to Angel.
Pastemak discovered the suits in the closet. He examined the Heffera labels, took one of the jackets off the hanger, and tucked it under his arm. A minute later he was gone.

The following morning Ley Pastemak walked into Heffera's.

His hair was disheveled and his clothes were wrinkled, and he smelled of whiskey.

The manager of the men's shop came up to him and said disapprovingly,
"May I help you, senor?"

Ley Pastemak grinned sheepishly. "Yeah," he said. "Tell you the truth,
I got in a card game last night. We all got drunk.

Anyway, we ended up in my hotel room. One of the guys-I don't remember his name-left his jacket there." Ley held up the' jacket. "It had your label in it, so I figured you could tell me where to return it to him."

. The manager examined the jacket. "Yes, we tailored this.

Please wait."

A few minutes later the man returned. "The name of the gentleman we made the jacket for is H. R. de Mendoza. He has a suite at the Aurora Hotel, suite four seventeen."

AT FOUR a.m. Ley Pastemak was silently moving down the deserted fourth-floor corridor of the Aurora Hotel. When he reached 417, he

looked around to make sure no one was in sight.

He reached down to the lock and inserted a wire. When he heard the door
click open, he pulled out a .45-caliber SIG-Sauer pistol with a
silencer.

He sensed a draft as the door across the hall opened, and before he
could swing around, he felt something hard and cold pressing. against
the back of his neck.

"I don't like being followed," Angel said.

Ley Pastemak heard the click of the trigger a second before his brain
was torn apart.

THE telephone call had come, and it was time to move. First Angel had
some shopping to do. There was a good lingerie shop on
Pueyrred6n-expensive, but Neusa deserved the,best. The inside of the
shop was cool and quiet.

"I would like to see a negligee, something very frilly," Angel said.

The female clerk staied.

"The best you have."

Fifteen minutes later Angel left the shop and hailed a taxi.

Angel gave the driver an address on Humberto, alighted a block away, and
hailed another taxi.

"A d6nde, porfavor?"

"Aeropuerto."

There would be a ticket for London waiting there. Tourist.

First class was too conspicuous.

Two hours later Angel watched the city of Buenos Aires disappear beneath the clouds, like some celestial magician's trick, and concentrated on the assignment ahead, thinking about the instructions that had been given. Make sure the children die with her. Their deaths must be spectacular.

Angel smiled and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

THE PAsSpoRT R= "H. R. DE Mendoza." The ticket at London's Heathrow Airport was on TAROM Airlines, to Bucharest.

Angel sent a telegram . from the airport: ARRIVING WEDNESDAY. H. R. DE MENDOZA.

It was addressed to Eddie Maltz.

IN the morning Mary kept trying to phone Louis at home. No answer. She tried the French embassy. They had no idea where he was. "Please have him call me as soon as you hear from him."

She replaced the receiver. There was nothing to do but wait.

A few minutes later Dorothy Stone, her secretary, came into Mary's office. "There's a call for you, but she refuses to give her name.

"I'll take it." Mary picked up the phone. "Hello, this is Ambassador

Ashley."

A soft female voice with a Remanian accent said, "This is Corina
Socoli." The ballerina's name registered instantly.

"I need your help," the girl said. "I have decided to defect."

I can't handle this today, Mary thought. Not now. She said, "I-I don't
know if I can help you." Her mind was racing. She tried to remember
what she had been told about defectors: "Many of them are Soviet plants.
We don't grant political asylum unless there's a dam good reason."

Corina Socoli was sobbing. "Please. I am not safe staying where I am.
You must send someone to get me."

"Where are you?" Mary asked.

There was a pause. Then, "I am at the Roscow Inn, in Moldavia. Will
you come for me?"

"I can't," Mary said. "But I'll send someone to get you. Don't call
on this phone again. just wait where you are. I-"

The door opened, and Mike Slade walked in. Mary looked up in shock. He
was moving toward her.

The voice on the phone was saying, "Hello? Hello?"

"Who are you talking to?" Mike asked.

"To-to Dr. Desforges." She replaced the receiver, terrified.

"He's-he's on his way over to see me." Don't be

ridiculous, she told
herself. You're in the embassy. He wouldn't dare do
anything to you
here.

There was a strange look in Mike's eyes. "Are you sure
you're well
enough to be back at work?"

The nerve. "Yes. I'm fine." She was finding it hard to
breathe.

Her intercom phone rang. "If you'll excuse me . .
-"Sure." Mike Slade
stood there staring at her, then turned and left.

Almost overcome with relief, Mary picked up the telephone.

"Hello?"

It was jerry Davis, the public affairs consul. "Madam
Ambassador, I'm
sorry to disturb you, but I'm afraid I have some terrible
news. Dr.
Louis Desforges has been murdered."

The room began to swim. "Are you-are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. His wallet was found on his body."

Sensory memories flooded through her, and a voice over the
telephone was
saying, "This is Sheriff Monster. Your husband has been
killed in a car
accident." And all the old sorrows came rushing back,
stabbing at her,
tearing her apart.

"How did it happen?" Her voice was strangled.

"He was shot to death."

"Do they-do they know who did it?"

"No, ma'am. The Securitate .4nd the French embassy are investigating."

Mary dropped the receiver, her mind and body numb, and leaned back in her chair, studying the. ceiling. There was a crack in it. I must have that repaired, Mary thought. We mustn't have cracks in our embassy. There's another-crack. Cracks everywhere, and when there is a crack, evil things get in. Edward is dead.

Louis is dead. I can't go through this pain again. Who would want to kill Louis?

The answer immediately followed the question. Mike Slade.

Louis had discovered that Slade was feeding Mary arsenic. Slade probably thought that with Louis dead, no one could prove anything against him. A sudden realization filled her with a new terror. Who are you talking to? But Mike must have known that Desforges was dead.

Mary stayed in her office all morning, planning her next move.

I'm not going to let Mike Slade drive me away, she decided. I'm not going to let him kill me. I have to stop him. She was filled with a rage such as she had never known before. She was going to protect herself and her children. And she was going to destroy Mike Slade.

"Madam Ambassador..." Dorothy Stone was holding an envelope out to her.
"The guard at the gate asked me to give you this."

The envelope was marked "Personal. For the amba ,
ssador's eyes only."
Mary tore it open. The note was written in a neat
copperplate
handwriting. It read:

Dear Madam Ambassador:

Enjoy your last day on earth.

Angel

Another one of Mike's scare tactics, Mary thought. It
won't work. I'll
keep well away from him.

COLONEL MCKinney was studying the note. He looked up at
Mary. "You
were scheduled to appear this afternoon at the ground
breaking for the
new library addition. I'll cancel it and-"

"No."

"Madam Ambassador, it's too dangerous for you to-"

"I'll be safe." She knew where the danger lay, and she had
a plan.
"Please tell Mike Slade that I wish to see him right
away."

"You wanted to talk to me?" Mike Slade's tone was casual.

"I received a call from someone who wants to defect."

"Who is it?"

She had no intention of telling him. He would betray the
girl.

"That's not important. I want you to bring this, person
in."

Mike frowned. "This could lead to a lot of-"

Mary cut him short. "I want you to go to the]Roscow Inn at Moldavia and pick her up."

He started to argue, until he saw the expression on her face. "If that's what you want, I'll send-"

"No." Mary's voice was steel. "I want you to go. I'm sending two men with you." With Gunny and another marine along, Mike would not be able to play any tricks. She had told Gunny not to let Mike Slade out of his sight.

Mike was studying Mary, puzzled. "I have a heavy schedule," he began.

"I want you to leave immediately. Gunny is waiting for you in your office. You're to bring the defector back here to me."

Mike nodded slowly. "All right."

Mary watched him go, with a feeling of relief so intense that she felt giddy. With Mike Slade out of the way, she would be safe.

THE ground-breaking ceremony for the new American library addition was scheduled to be held at four o'clock at Alexandru Sahia Square, in a vacant lot next to the main library building. By three p.m. a large crowd had already gathered. Captain Aurel Istrase, head of the Securitate, had been told of the death threat and had ordered all automobiles removed from the square, so that there was no danger of a car bomb. In addition, police had been stationed around the entire area

and a sharpshooter was on the roof of the library. At a few minutes before four, bomb experts swept the area and found no explosives; everything was in readiness for Mar)ls arrival.

As Mary walked from her limousine toward the lot where the ceremony was to take place, two armed -members of the Securitate walked in front of her and two behind her, shielding her with their bodies.

The onlookers applauded as she stepped into the small circle that had been cleared for her. The crowd was a mixture of Romamans, Americans, and attaches from other embassies in Bucharest. As Mary looked at the people she thought, I should never have come here. I'm terrified.

Colonel McKinney was saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present the ambassador from the United States of America."' The crowd applauded.

Mary took a deep breath and began. "Thank you.

She had been so caught up in the maelstrom of events of the past week that she had not prepared a speech, but some deep wellspring within her gave her the words. She found herself saying, "What we are doing here today may seem a small thing, but it is important, because it is one more bridge between our country and all the countries of Eastern Europe. The new buildding we are dedicating here today will be filled with information about the United States of America......

Colonel McKinney and his men were moving through the

crowd. The note
had said "Enjoy your last day on earth." When did the killer's day end?
Six p.m.? Nine? Midnight?

On the far side of the square a car suddenly raced past the police
barrier and screamed to a stop. at the curb. As a startled policeman
moved toward it the driver jumped out and began running away. As he
ran, he pulled a device from his pocket and pressed it. The car
exploded, sending out a shower of metal into the er.owd. None of it
reached the center,"where Mary was standing, but the spectators began to
panic, trying to get away. The sharpshooter on the roof raised his
rifle and put a bullet through the fleeing man's heart before he could
escape.

It took the Remanian police an hour to clear the crowd away and remove
the body. The fire department had put out the flames of the burning
car'. Mary was driven back to the embassy, shaken.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to go to the residence and rest?"
Colonel McKinney asked her. "You've just been through a horrifying
experience."

"No," Mary said stubbornly. "The embassy." That was the only place
where she could safely talk to Stanton Rogers. I must talk to him soon,
she thought, or I'll go to pieces.

The strain of everything that was happening to her was becoming
unbearable. She had made sure that Mike Slade was safely.

out of the
way, yet an attempt had still been made on her life. So he was not
working alone.

AT six o'clock Mike Slade walked into Mary's office. He was furious. "I
put Corina Socoli in a room upstairs", he said curtly.

"Nice shot, not to tell me who I was picking up. You've made a big
mistake. We have to return her. She's a national treasure. The
Romanian government would never allow her out of the country." Colonel
McKinney hurried into the office. He stopped short as he saw Mike. "We
have an identification on the dead man. He's Angel, all right. His
real name is H. R. de Mendoza."

Mike was staring at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't the ambassador tell you? She received a death warning from
Angel. He tried to assassinate her at the ground-breaking ceremony this
afternoon. One of Istrase's men got him."

Mike stood there, his eyes fixed on Mary. "Where's the body?" he asked
McKinney.

"In the morgue at police headquarters."

THE body was lying on a stone slab. He had been an ordinarylooking man,
of medium height, with a small, thin nose that went with his tight
mouth, very small feet, and thinning hair. His belongings were piled on
a table.

Mike examined the jacket label. It was from a shop in

Buenos Aires. The
leather shoes also had an Argentinean label. Mike turned to the
sergeant. "What do you have on him?"

"He flew in from London on TAROM Airlines two days ago, checked into the
Intercontinental under the name of de Mendoza.

His passport shows his home address as Buenos Aires. It is forged. He
does not look like an international killer, does he?"

"No," Mike agreed. "He doesn't."

Two dozen blocks away Angel was walking past the residence.

The photographs that had been sent were excellent, but Angel believed in
personally checking out every detail.

,Angel grinned at the thought of the harade in the town square.

It had been child's play to hire a junkie for the price of a nose-ful of
cocaine. It threw everyone off guard. Let them sweat. But the big
event is yet to come, Angel thought. For five million dollars I will
give them a show they will never forget. What do the television
networks call them? Spectaculars. They will get a spectacular in
living color.

There will be a Fourth of July celebration at the residence , the voice
had said. "There will be balloons, a marine band, entertainers." Angel
smiled and thought, A five-million-dollar spectacular.

STANroN Rogers was on the line from Washington. Mary

grabbed the
private phone in the bubble room as if it were a lifeline.

"Mary, I can't understand a word you're saying. Slow down."

"I'm sorry, Stan. Didn't you get my cable?"

"No. I've just returned. There was no cable from you. What's wrong?"

Mary fought to control her hysteria, thinking, Where should I begin? She
took a deep breath, and said, "Mike Slade is trying to murder me."

There was a shocked silence. "Mary, you can't believe-"

"It's true. I know it is. I met a doctor from the French embassyLouis
Desforges. I became ill, and he found out I was being poisoned with
arsenic. Mike was doing it."

Rogers' voice was sharp. "What makes you think that?"

"Louis-Dr. Desforges-figured it out. Mike Slade made coffee for me
every morning, with arsenic in it. I have proof that he got hold of the
arsenic. Last night Louis was murdered, and this afternoon someone
working with Slade tried to assassinate me."

This time the silence was even longer.

When Stanton Rogers spoke again, his tone was urgent. "What I'm going
to ask you is very important, Mary. Think carefally.

Could it have been anyone besides Mike Slade?"

"No. He's been trying to get me out from the beginning."

"All right," Rogers said crisply. "I'll inform the President.

We'll handle Slade. I'll also arrange extra protection for you."

"Stan, Sunday night I'm giving a Fourth of July party at the residence.
Do you think I should cancel it?"

There was a thoughtful silence. "As a matter of fact, the party might
be a good idea. Keep a lot of people around you. Mary, I don't want to
frighten you any more than you already are, but I would suggest that you
not let the children out of your sight. Not for a minute. Slade might
try to get at you. through them."

She felt a shudder go through her. "Why is Slade doing this?"

"I wish I knew. It makes no sense. But I'm going to find out. In the
meantime, keep as far away from him as you possibly can."

When Mary hung up, it was as though an enormous burden had been lifted
from her shoulders.

EDDiE Maltz answered on the first ring. The conversation lasted for ten
minutes.

"I'll make sure everything is there," Eddie promised.

Angel hung up.

Eddie Maltz thought, I wonder what Angel needs all that stuff for. He
looked at his watch. Forty-eight hours to go.

THE moment Stanton Rogers finished talking to Mary, he

placed an
emergency call to Colonel McKinney. "I want you to pick up Mike Slade,"
he said. "Hold him in close custody until you hear from me."

"Mike Slade?" asked the colonel incredulously.

"I want him held and isolated. He's probably armed and dangerous. Don't
let him talk to anyone. Call me back at the White House as soon as you
have him."

"Yes, sir."

Two hours later Stanton Rogers' phone rang. He snatched up the
receiver.

"It's Colonel.McKinney, Mr. Rogers."

"Do you have Slade?"

"No, sir. There's a problem. Mike Slade has disappeared."

Sofia, Bulgaria. Saturday, July 3- In a small, nondescript building, a
group of Eastern Committee members was meeting. Seated around the table
were powerful representatives from Russia, China, Czechoslovakia,
Pakistan, India, and Malaysia.

The chairman was speaking. "We welcome our brothers and sisters on the
Eastern Committee who have joined us today. I am happy to tell you that
we have excellent news from the Western Committee. The final phase of
our plan is about to be successfully concluded. It will happen tomorrow
night at the American ambassador's residence in Bucharest.

Arrangements
have been made for international press and television coverage."

Code name Kali spoke. "The American ambassador and her two children-"
"Will be assassinated, along with a hundred or so other Americans. We
are all aware of the grave risks and the holocaust that may follow. It
is time to put the motion to a vote." He started at the far end of the
table. "Brahma?"

"Yes."

"Vishnu?"

"Yes."

"Krishna?"

"Yes."

When everyone had voted, the chairman declared, "It is unanimous. We
owe a particular vote of thanks to the person who has helped so much to
bring this about." He turned to the American.

"My pleasure," Mike Slade said.

THE decorations for the Fourth of July party were flown into Bucharest
late Saturday afternoon and trucked directly to a United States
government warehouse. The cargo consisted of a thousand red, white, and
blue balloons packed in flat.boxes, three steel cylinders of helium to
blow up the balloons, two hundred and fifty rolls of streamers, party
favors, noisemakers, a dozen banners, and six dozen miniature American

flags. The cargo.was unloaded in the warehouse at eight p.m. Two hours later a jeep arrived with three oxygen cylinders stamped with U.S. Army markings. The driver placed them inside.

At one a.m., when the warehouse was deserted, Angel appeared. The warehouse door had been left unlocked. Angel went inside, examined the cylinders carefully, and went to work. The first task was to empty the three helium tanks until each was only one-third full. After that, the rest was simple.

AT six o'clock on the evening Of July 4 a U.S. Army truck pulled up to the service entrance of the residence and was stopped. The guard said, "What have you got in there?"

"Goodies for the party tonight."

"Let's take a look." The guard inspected the inside of the truck.

"What's in the boxes?"

"Some helium and balloons and flags and stuff."

"Open them."

Fifteen minutes later the truck was passed through. Inside the compound a marine corporal and two marine guards unloaded the equipment and carried it into a storage room off the ballroom.

As they began to unpack, Eddie Maltz walked in, accompanied by a stranger wearing army fatigues.

One guard said, "Who's going to blow up all these

balloons?"

"Don't worry," Eddie Maltz said. "This is the age of technology." He nodded toward the stranger. "Here's the one that's in charge of the balloons. Colonel McKinney's orders."

The other guard grinned at the stranger."'Better you than me."

The two guards finished unpacking and left.

"You have an hour," Eddie Maltz told the stranger. "Better get to work." Maltz nodded to the corporal and walked out.

The corporal walked over to one of the cylinders. "What's in these babies?"

"Helium," the stranger said curtly.

As the corporal stood watching, the stranger picked up a balloon, put the neck to the nozzle of a cylinder for an instant, and, as the balloon filled, tied off the neck. The balloon floated to the ceiling. The whole operation took no more than a second.

"Hey, that's great." The corporal smiled.

IN HER Office at the embassy Mary Ashley was finishing UP some action cables. She desperately wished the party could have been called off There were going to be more than two hundred guests. She hoped Mike Slade was caught before the party began.

Tim and Beth were under constant supervision at the residence. How could Mike bear to harm them? He's not sane, she thought.

Mary rose to put some papers into the shredder, and froze.

Mike Slade was walking into her office through the connecting door. She opened her mouth to scream.

She was terrified. He could kill her before she could call for help, and he could escape the same way he had come in.

"Colonel McKinney's men are looking for you. You -can kill me," Mary said defiantly, "but you'll never escape."

Angel's the one who's trying to kill you," Mike said.

"You're a liar. Angel is dead. I saw him shot."

"Angel is a professional from Argentina. The last thing he would do is walk around with Argentine labels in his clothes. The slob the police killed was an amateur who was set up."

"I don't believe a word you're saying," Mary said. "You killed Dr. Desforges. You tried to poison me. Do you deny that?"

Mike studied her for a long moment. "No. I don't deny it, but you'd better hear the story from a friend of mine." He turned toward the door to his office. "Come in, Bill."

Colonel McKinney walked into the room. "I think it's time we all had a chat, Madam Ambassador. . .

IN the residence storage room the stranger in army fatigues was filling the balloons under the watchful eye of the corporal.

Boy, that's one ugly customer, the corporal thought.

Whewl The corporal
could not understand why the white balloons were being filled from one
cylinder, the red balloons from a second cylinder, and the blue ones
from a third. Why not use each cylinder until it's empty? he wondered.
He was tempted to ask, but he did not want to start a conversation. Not
with this one.

"LET's start at the beginning," Colonel McKinney said. "On Inauguration
Day when the President announced that he wanted to open relations with
every iron curtain country, he exploded a bombshell. There's a faction
in our government that's convinced that if we get too involved with the
Eastern bloc, the Communists will destroy us. On the other side of the
iron curtain there are Communists who believe that our President's plan
is a trick-a Trojan horse to bring our capitalist spies into their
countries. A group of powerful men on both sides had formed a
supersecret alliance, called Patriots for Freedom. They decided the
only way to destroy the President's plan was to let him start it, and
then to sabotage it in such a dramatic way that it would never be tried
again. That's where you came into the picture."

"But why me? Why was I chosen?"

"Because the packaging was important," Mike said. "You were exactly the
image they needed-Mrs. America, with two squeakyclean kids. They were
determined to have you. When your husband got in the wa . way, they
murdered him and made it look like an accident so you

wouldn't have any
suspicions and refuse the post."

Mary could not speak. The horror of what Mike was saying was too
appalling.

"Their next step was your buildup. They used their press connections
around the world and saw to it that you became everyone's darling-the
beautiful lady who was going to lead the world down the road to peace."

"And-and now?"

Mike's voice gentled. "Their plan is to assassinate you and the
children as shockingly as possible-to sicken the world so much that it
would put an end to any further ideas of ddtente."

Mary sat there in stunned silence.

"That states it bluntly but accurately," Colonel McKinney said quietly.
"Mike is with the CIA. After your husband and Marin Groza were
murdered, Mike started to get on the trail of Patriots for Freedom. They
thought he was on their Ode and invited him to join.

"we talked the idea over with President Ellison, and he gave his
approval. The President has been kept abreast of every development. His
overriding concern has been that you and the children be protected, but
he dared not discuss what he knew with you or anyone else, because Ned
Tillingest, head of the CIA, had warned him that there were high-level
leaks."

Mary's head was spinning. She said to Mike, "But you tried to kill me."

He sighed. "Lady, I've been trying to save your life. You haven't made it easy. I tried every way I knew how to get you to take the kids and go home, where you'd be safe."

"But you poisoned me."

"Not fatally. I wanted to get you just sick enough so that you'd have to leave Remania. Our doctors were waiting for 'you in Frankfurt. I couldn't tell you the truth, because it would have blown the whole operation. Even now, we don't know who put the organization together. He never attends meetings. He's known only as the Controller."

"And Louis?"

"The doctor was one of them. He was Angel's backup. He was an explosives expert. A phony kidnapping was set up, and you were rescued by Mr. Charm." Mike saw the expression on Mary Is face. "You were lonely and vulnerable, and they worked on that.

You weren't the first one to fall for the good doctor."

Something bothered Mary. "But Mike, why did you kill Louis?"

"I had no choice. The whole point of their plan was to murder you,and the children as publicly and spectacularly as possible.

Louis knew I was a member of the Committee. Poisoning wasn't the way you were supposed to die. When he figured out that I was

poisoning you,
he became suspicious of me. I had to kill him before he exposed me to
the Committee."

Mary sat there listening as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.
The man she had distrusted had poisoned her to keep her alive, and the
man she thought she loved had saved her for a more dramatic death. She
and her children had been used. I was the Judas goat, Mary thought. All
the warmth that everyone showed me was phony. The only one who was real
was Stanton Rogers.

Or was he? "Stanton," Mary began. "Is he-"

"He's been protective of you all the way," Colonel McKinney assured her.
"When he thought Mike was the one trying to kill you, he ordered me to
arrest him."

Mary looked at Mike. He had been sent here to protect her, and all the
time she had looked on him as the enemy. Her thoughts were in a
turmoil. "Then Louis never did have a wife or children?"

"No."

Mary remembered something. "But I asked Eddie Maltz to check, and he
told me that Louis was married and had two daughters."

Mike and Colonel McKinney exchanged a look.

"He'll be taken care of," McKinney said. "I sent him to Frankfurt. I'll
have him picked up."

"Who is Angel?" Mary asked.

Mike answered, "He's an assassin from South America. He's probably the
best in the world. The Committee agreed to pay him five million dollars
to kill you."

Mary listened to the words in disbelief.

Mike went on. "We know he's in Bucharest, but we don't have a single
description of Angel. He uses a dozen different passports.

No one has ever talked directly to him. They deal through his mistress,
Neusa Mufiez. The various groups in the Committee are so
compartmentalized that I haven't been able to learn what Angel's plan
is."

"What's to stop him from killing me?"

"Us," said Colonel McKinney. "With the help of the Remanian government
we've taken extraordinary precautions for the party.

We've covered every possible contingency."

"What happens now?" Mary asked.

Mike said carefully, "That's up to you. Angel was ordered to carry out
the contract at your party tonight. We're sure we can catch him, but if
you and the children aren't at the party . .

"You're asking me to set myself up as a target?"

Colonel McKinney said, "You don't have to agree."

I could end this now, Mary said to herself. I could go back to Kansas
with the children and leave this nightmare behind. Angel

would forget
about me. She looked up at Mike and Bill McKinney and said, "I won't
expose my children to danger."

McKinney said, "I can arrange for Beth and Tim to be spirited out of the
residence and taken here under escort."

Mary looked at Mike for a long time. Finally she spoke. "How does a
Judas goat dress?"

Chapter Eleven

There was a tremendous feeling of excitement in the air. Hundreds of
curious Remanians had gathered outside the residence, which was ringed
with huge spotlights that lit up the sky. The crowd was kept in order
by a detachment of American MPs and Remanian police. Plain clothes men
mingled with the multitude, looking for anything suspicious. Some of
them moved around with trained police dogs that were sniffing for
explosives.

The press coverage was enormous. There were photographers and reporters
from a dozen countries. They had all been carefully checked and their
equipment searched before they were allowed to'enter the residence.

"A cockroach couldn't sneak into this place tonight," the marine officer
in-charge of security boasted.

IN THE storage room the marine corporal was getting bored watching the
person in army fatigues filling up the balloons. He pulled out a

cigarette and started to light it.

Angel yelled, "Put that out!"

The corporal looked up, startled. "What's the problem? You're filling those with helium, aren't you? Helium doesn't burn."

"Put it out! Colonel McKinney said no smoking here."

Grumbling, the corporal put out the cigarette.

Angel watched to make sure there were no sparks left, then turned back to the task of filling each balloon from a different cylinder.

It was true that helium did not burn, but the cylinders were not filled with helium. The first tank was filled with propane, the second tank with white phosphorus, and the third with an oxygen-acetylene mix. Angel had left just enough helium in each tank to make the balloons rise.

Angel was filling the white balloons with propane, the red balloons with oxygen-acetylene, and the blue balloons with white phosphorus. When the balloons were exploded, the white phosphorus would act as an incendiary for the initial gas discharge, drawing in oxygen so that all breath would be sucked out of the body of anyone within fifty yards. The phosphorus would instantly turn to a hot, scaring molten liquid, falling on every person in the room. The thermal effect would destroy the lungs and throat, and the blast would flatten an area of a square block.

It's going to be beautiful, Angel thought.

Angel straightened up and looked at the colorful balloons floating against the ceiling of the storage room. "I am finished."

"Okay." The corporal called four marine guards who were stationed in the ballroom itself.. "Help me get these balloons out there."

One of the guards opened wide the doors to the ballroom, which was already crowded with guests. The room had been decorated with American flags and red, white, and blue streamers. At the far end was a raised'stand for the band.

"It's a lovely room," Angel said, thinking, In one hour it will be filled with burned corpses. "Could I take a picture of it?"

The corporal shrugged. "Why not? Let's go, fellas."

The marines pushed past Angel and started shoving the inflated balloons into the ballroom. "Easy," Angel warned. "Easy."

"Don't worry," a marine called. "We won't break your precious balloons."

Angel stood in the doorway, staring at the riot of colors ascending in a rising rainbow, and smiled. One thousand of the lethal little beauties nestled against the ceiling. Angel took a camera from a pocket and stepped into the ballroom.

"Heyl You're not allowed in here," the corporal said.

"I just want to take a picture to show my daughter."

I'll bet that's some looking daughter, the corporal thought
sardonically. "All right. But make it quick."

Angel glanced across the room. Ambassador Mary Ashley was entering
with her two children. Angel grinned. Perfect timing.

When the corporal turned his back, Angel quickly set the camera down
under a cloth-covered table. The automatic timing device was set for a
one-hour delay. Everything was ready.

Five minutes later Angel was outside the residence, strolling down
Alexandru Sahia Street.

BEFORE the party began, Mary had taken the children upstairs.

She felt she owed them the truth.

They sat listening, wide-eyed, as Mary explained what had been happening
and what might be about to happen.

"You'll be taken out of here, where you'll be safe," she said.

"But what about you?" Beth asked. "Can't you come with us?"

"No, darling. Not if we want to catch this man."

Tim was trying not to cry. "How do you know they'll catch him?" Mary
thought about that a moment, and said, "Because Mike Slade said so."
Okay, fellas?"

Beth and Tim looked at each other. They were both whitefaced,
terrified. Mary's heart went out to them. They're too

young to have to
go through this, she thought.

Fifteen minutes later Mary, Beth, and Tim entered the ballroom. They
walked across the floor, greeting guests, trying to conceal their
nervousness. When they reached the other side of the room, Mary turned
to the children. "You have to get up very early tomorrow," she said
loudly. "Back to your rooms."

The moment the children left the ballroom, they were escorted to the
service entrance by Colonel McKinney. He said to the two armed marines
waiting at the door, "Take them to the embassy.

Don't let them out of your sight."

Mike Slade watched them leave, then went to find Mary.

"The children are on their way. I have to do some checking. I'll be
back."

Mary tried to stop the pounding of her heart. How was Angel planning to
assassinate her? She looked around the festive ballroom, but there was
no clue.

"Don't leave me." The words came out before she could stop herself "I
want to go with you. I feel safer with you."

Mike grinned. "Now, that's a switch. Come on."

Mary followed him, staying close behind. The orchestra had begun
playing, and people were dancing. Those who were not dancing were
helping themselves from the silver trays of champagne

being offered, or
from the buffet tables.

The room looked spectacular. Mary raised her head, and there were the
balloons, a thousand of them-red, white, and bluefloating against the
pink ceiling. Her nerves were so taut that she was finding it difficult
to breathe. Angel could be watching her .this very minute.

"Do you think Angel is here now?- she asked.

"don't kno*," Mike said. He saw the expression on her face.

Look, if you want to leave-"

"No. I'm the bait. Without me, he won't spring the trap."

He nodded and squeezed her arm. "Rlight."

Colonel McKinney approached. "We've done a thorough search, Mike. We
haven't found a thing. I don't like it."

"Plees take another look around." Mike signaled to four armed, marines
standing by, and they moved up next to Mary. "Be right back," Mike
said.

Mary swallowed nervously. "Please."

Mike and McKinney, accompanied by two guards with sniffer dogs, searched
every room in the residence. They found nothing suspicious.

In one of the guest rooms, its door guarded by marines, was Corina
Socoli, lying on the bed reading a book. Young and

beautiful and
talented, the Remanian national treasure. Could she be a plant? Could
she be helping Angel?

They returned to the kitchen.

"What about poison?" asked McKinney.

"Not photogenic enough. Angel's going for the big bang."

"Mike, there's no way anyone could get explosives into this place. The
place is clean."

"There's one way."

McKinney looked at Mike. "How?"

"I don't know. But Angel knows."

They searched the library and the offices again. Nothing. They passed
the storage room, where the corporal was shoving out a few balloons that
had been left behind. He watched them float to the ceiling.

"Pretty, huh?" the corporal said.

"Yeah," Mike said. He started to walk on, then stopped. "Corporal,
where did these balloons come from?"

"From the U.S. air base in Frankfurt, sir."

Mike indicated the helium cylinders. "And these?"

"Same place. They were escorted to our warehouse per Colonel McKinney's
instructions, sir."

Mike said to McKinney, "Let's check upstairs again."

They turned to leave. The corporal said, "Oh, Colonel, the person you
sent forgot to leave a time slip. Is that going to be handled by
military payroll or civilian?"

Colonel McKinney frowned. "What person?"

"The one you authorized to fill the balloons."

"I never- Who said I authorized it?"

"Eddie Maltz. He said youMcKinney said, "Eddie Maltz?"

Mike turned to the corporal, his voice urgent. "What did this man look
like?"

"Oh, it wasn't a man, sir. It was a woman. To tell you the truth, I
thought she looked weird. Fat and ugly. She had a funny accent.

She was pockmarked and had kind of a puffy face."

Mike said to McKinney, "That sounds a lot like the description of Neusa
Mufiez that Harry lantz gave the Committee."

The revelation hit them both at the same time.

Mike said slowly, "Oh, my Godl Neusa Muez is Angell" He pointed to the
cylinders. "She filled the balloons from these?"

"Yes, sir. It was funny. I lit a cigarette, and she screamed at me to
put it out. I said. "Helium doesn't burn," and she said-"

Mike looked up. "The baloons! The explosives are in the baloons!" The
two men stared at the high ceiling covered with the spectacular red,
white, and blue balloons.

"She must be using some kind of a remote-control device to explode
them." Mike turned to the corporal. "How long ago did she leave?"

"I guess about an hour ago."

UNDER the table, unseen, the timing device had six minutes left.

Mike was frantically scanning the room. "She could have put the timer
anywhere. It could go off any second. We'll never find it."

Mary was approaching. Mike turned to her. "You've got to clear the
room. Fast! Make an announcement. It will sound better coming from
you. Get everybody outside."

She was looking at him, bewildered. "But why?"

"We found our playmate's toy," Mike said grimly. He pointed.

Those balloons. They're lethal."

Mary was looking up at them, horror on her face. "Can't we take them
down?"

Mike snapped, "There are hundreds of them. By the time-"

Mary's throat was so dry she could hardly get the words out.

"Mike . . . I know a way." The two men stared at her. "The
Ambassador's Folly. The roof It slides open."

Mike tried to control his excitement. "How does it work?"

:"There's a switch that-"

"No," Mike said. "Nothing electrical. A spark could set them all off.
Can it be done manually?"

" Yes. The roof is divided in half There's a crank on each side that-"
She was talking to herself The two men were frantically racing upstairs.
When they reached the top floor, they found a door opening onto a loft
and hurried inside. A wooden ladder led to a catwalk above that was
used by workmen when they cleaned the ballroom ceiling. A crank was
fastened to the wall.

"There must be another one on the other side," Mike said.

He started across the narrow catwalk, pushing his way through the sea of
deadly balloons, struggling to keep his balance, trying not to look down
at the mob of people far below. A current of air pushed a mass of
balloons against him, and he slipped. One foot went off the catwalk. He
began to fall. He grabbed the boards as he fell, hanging on. Slowly he
managed to pull himself up. He was soaked in perspiration. He inched
his way along the rest of the walk. Fastened to the wall was the crank.

"I'm ready," Mike called to the colonel, who was hidden from sight by
the balloons. "Careful. No sudden moves."

"Right."

Mike began turning the crank very slowly.

Under the table, the timer was down to two minutes.

Mixe could hear the other crank being turned. Slowly, very Slowly, the roof started to slide open. A few balloons drifted into the night air, and as the roof opened farther, more balloons began to escape. Hundreds of them poured through the opening, dancing into the star-filled night, drawing oohs and aahs from the unsuspecting guests below and the people out in the street.

Under the table, there were forty-five seconds remaining on the remote-control timer. A cluster of balloons caught on the edge of the ceiling, just out of Mike's reach. He leaned forward, trying to free them. They swayed just beyond his fingertips. Carefully he moved out on the catwalk, with nothing to hold on to, and strained to push the balloons free. Now! Mike stood there watching the last of the balloons -escape. They soared higher and higher, painting the velvet night with their vivid colors, and suddenly the -sky exploded.

There Was a tremendous roar, and the tongues of red and white flames shot high into the air. It was a Fourth of July celebration such as hoid never been seen before. Below, everyone applauded.

Mike watched, drained, too tired to move. It was over.

The roundup was timed to take place simultaneously, in farflung corners of the world.

Floyd Baker, the Secretary of State, was with his mistress when the door burst open. Four men came into the room. "FBI, Mr.

Secretary. You're
under arrest."

"You must be mad. What's the charge?"

"Treason, Thor."

General Oliver Brooks, Odin, was having breakfitst at his club when two
FBI agents walked up to his table and arrested him.

In London, Sir Alex Hyde-White, K.B.E., M.P., one of the senior heads of
the British Secret Intelligence, Service, code nwne Freyr, was being
toasted at a parliamentary dinner when the club steward approached him.
"Excuse me, Sir Alex. There are some gentlemen outside who would like a
word with you... ."

In Paris, in the Chambre des D,6putds de la Rdpublique Frangaise, a
deputy, Balder, was called off the floor.

In the parliament building in New Delhi, the speaker of the' Lok Sabha,
Vishnu, was taken to jail.

In Rome, a deputy of the Camera dei Deputati, Tyr, was in a Turkish bath
when he was arrested.

The sweep went on. In Mexico and Albania and Japan, high officials were
arrested. A member of the Bundestag in West Germany, a deputy in the
Nationalrat in Austria, the vice-chairman of the Presidium of the Soviet
Union. The arrests included the president of a large shipping company
and a powerful union leader, a telesion evangelist and the head of an
oil cartel.

Eddie Maltz was shot while trying to escape.

Pete Connors committed suicide while FBI agents were breaking down the door to his office.

MARY Ashley and Mike Slade were in the bubble room receiving telephone reports from around the world. Mike replaced the receiver and turned to Mary. "They've got most of them. Except for the Controller and Neusa Mufiez-Angel."

"No one knew that Angel was a woman?" Mary marveled.

"No. She had all of us fooled. Lantz described her to the Patriots for Freedom Committee as a fat, ugly moron.

"What about the Controller?" Mary asked.

"No one ever saw him. He gave orders by telephone. He was a brilliant organizer. The Committee was broken up into small cells so that one group never knew what the other was doing."

ANGEL was like an enraged animal. The contract had gone wrong somehow, but she had been prepared to make up for it.

She had called the private number in Washington and, using her dull, listless voice, had said, "Angel say to tell you no't to worry. There was some mistake, but he weel take care of it, mester. They will all die nex' time, and-"

"There won't be a next time!" the voice had exploded. "Angel bungled it. He's worse than an amateur."

"Angel tol' me-"

"I don't give a damn what he told you. He's finished. He won't get a
cent. just tell that incompetent to keep away. I'll find someone else
who knows how to do the job." And he had slammed the phone down.

The gringo dog. No one had ever treated Angel like that and lived. The
man was going to pay. Oh, how he would pay!

THE private phone in the bubble room rang. Mary picked it up.

It was Stanton Rogers. "Mary! You're safe! Thank God it's over.

Tell me what happened."

"It was Angel. She tried to blow up the residence and-"

"You mean he."

"No. Angel is a woman. Her name is Neusa Muez."

There was a long, stunned silence. "Neusa Muez? That fat, ugly moron
was Angel?"

Mary felt a sudden chill. "That's right, Stan," she said slowly.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mary?"

"No. I'm on my way to see the children. I'll talk to you later."

She replaced the receiver and sat dazed.

Mike looked at her. "What's the matter?"

She turned to him. "You said that Harry Lantz told only some Committee
members what Neusa Mufiez looked like."

"Yes."

Mary said, "Stanton Rogers just described her."

WHEN Angel's plane landed at Dulles Airport, she went to a telephone
booth and dialed the Controller's private number.

The familiar voice said, "Stanton Rogers."

Two days later Mike, Colonel McKinney, and Mary were seated in the
embassy conference room. An electronics expert had just finished
debugging it.

"It all fits now," Mike said. "The Controller had to be Stanton Rogers,
but none of us could see it."

"But why would he want to kill me?" Mary asked. "In the beginning he
was against my being appointed ambassador. He told me so himself."

Mike explained. "He hadn't completely formulated his plan then. But
once he realized what you and the children symbolized, he fought for you
to get the nomination. That's what threw us off the track. He was
behind you all the way, seeing to it that you got a buildup in the
press."

Mary shuddered. "Why did he get involved with-"

"He never forgave Paul Ellison for being President. He felt cheated. He
started out as a liberal, and he married a right-wing

reactionary. My
guess is that his wife turned him around."

"Have they found him yet?"

"No. He's disappeared. But he can't hide for very long."

Stamton Rogers' head was found in a Washington, D.C., garbage dump two
days later. His eyes had been torn out.

PAUL Ellison was calling from the White House. "I'm refusing to accept
your resignation, Mary. I know how 'much you've been through, but I'm
asking you to remain at your post in Remania."

I know how much you've been through. Did anyone have any idea? She had
been so unbelievably naive. She was going to show the world how
wonderful Americans really were. And all the time she had been a
cat's-paw. She and her children had been placed in mortal danger. She
thought of Edward and how he had been murdered, and of Louis and his
lies and his death. She thought of the destruction Angel had sown all
over the world.

I'm not the same person I was when I came here, Mary thought.

I've grown up the hard way, but I've grown up. I've managed to
accomplish something here. I got Hannah Murphy out of prison, and I
made our grain deal. I saved the' life of Ionescu's son, and I rescued
some Jews.

"Hello. Are you there?" the President asked.

"Yes, sir." She looked over at Mike Slade, who was slouched back in his
chair studying her.

"You've done a truly remarkable job," the President said.

"You're the person we need over there. You'll be doing our country a
great service."

The President was waiting for an answer. Mary was weighing her
decision. Finally she said, "Mr. President, if I did agree to stay, I
would insist that.our country give sanctuary to Corina Socoli."

"I'm sorry, Mary. I've already explained why we can't do that.

It would offend lonescu and-"

"He'll get over it. I know lonescu, Mr. President. He's using her as
a bargaining chip."

There was a long silence. "How would you get her out?"

"An army cargo plane is due to arrive in the morning. I'll send her out
in that."

There was a pause. "I'll square it with State. If that's all-"

Mary looked over at Mike Slade again. "There's one thing more. I want
Mike Slade to stay here with me. I need him. We make a good team."

Mike was watching her, a private smile on his lips.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," the President said firmly. "I need

Slade back here. He already has another assignment."

Mary sat there holding the phone, saying nothing.

The President went on. "We'll send you someone else.
Anyone you want.
Mary? Hello? What is this-some kind of blackmaill?"

Mary sat silently waiting.

Finally the President said grudgingly. "Well, I suppose if you really
need him, we might spare him for a little while."

Mary felt her heart lighten. "Thank you, Mr. President. I'll be happy
to stay on as ambassador."

The President had a final parting shot. "You're one ace of a
negotiator, Madun Ambassador. I have some interesting plans in mind for
you when you're finished there. Good luck! And stay out of trouble."
The line went dead.

Mary replaced the receiver and looked at Mike. "You're going to be
staying here. He told me to stay out of trouble."

Mike Slade grinned. "He has a nice sense of humor." He rose and moved
toward her. "Do you remember the day I met you and called you a perfect
ten?"

How well she remembered. "Yes."

"I was wrong. Now you're a perfect ten."

She felt a warm glow. "Oh, mike. . .

"Since I'm staying on,. Madam Ambassador, we'd better talk about the

problem we're having with the Remanian commerce minister." He looked into her eyes and said softly, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Epilogue

Alice Springs, Australia.

The chairwoman was ad ' dressing the Committee. "We have suffered a setback, but because of the lessons we have learned, our organization will become even stronger. Now it is time to take a vote. Aphrodite?"

"Yes."

,: Athene?"

"Yes.

"Cybele?"

"Yes."

Selene?"

Considering the horrible death of our former Controller, shouldn't we wait until-"

"Yes or no, please."

"No."

"Nike?"

"Yes.

"Nemesis?"

"Yes."

" The motion is carried. Please observe the usual precautions, ladies."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The name Sidney Sheldon has become synonymous with the term best-selling
novelist. But few of his fans know that before he composed a single
line of any novel, Sheldon was a successful writer for stage, screen,
and television. Over the years he collected an Oscar (for the film The
Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer) and a Tony Award (for the Broadway play
Redhead).

Still broader popular success came to Sheldon later, with the television
series I Dream of jeannie and Hart to Hart, which he created and
produced. It wasn't until he was fifty-three that he turned to writing
novels.

Why the change? Sheldon explains: "I came up with an idea for a
television drama about a psychiatrist. In order for the plot to make
Sidney Sheldon sense, the viewer had to know what the psychiactrist was
thinking, and I didn't know how to achieve introspection like that on
television. The only way to do it was as a novel." That novel was The
Naked Face, and it was nominated for an Edgar award by the Mystery
Writers of America. From then on, Sheldon wrote one best seller after
another. Windmills of the Gods is his seventh.

Thorough research and old-fashioned hard work are Sheldon's trademarks.
He spent three and a half years on Windmills, rewriting it

a dozen
times. But hard work alone is not enough. Sheldon attributes his
books' enormous appeal to the simple fact that he likes what readers
like. "My characters are very real to me," he says, "and I think
therefore very real to others." The same rule applies to his penchant
for intriguing.plot twists that keep the reader hooked. "I love that
kind of book, and I think my readers do, too."

And speaking of twists, Windmills contains a secret one. Rememher the
somber quote by H. L. Dietrich at the beginning, from which the title
is taken? "There is no H. L. Dietrich," Mr. Sheldon says impishly.
"I make up those introductory quotes in all my books."